

UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL OKLAHOMA
Edmond, Oklahoma
Dr. Joe C. Jackson College of Graduate Studies

Summer of Excess

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS IN ENGLISH

with a major in CREATIVE WRITING

By

Kassidi Growall

Edmond, Oklahoma

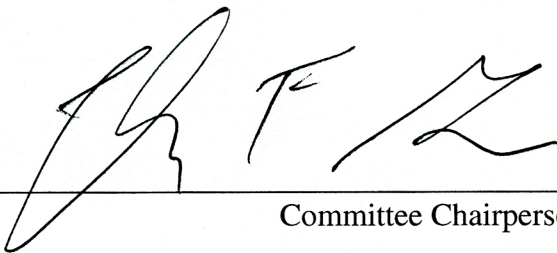
2013


Summer of Excess

A THESIS

APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

December 3, 2013

By  _____
Committee Chairperson

 _____
Committee Member

A. HEDGECOKE _____
Committee Member
Signed for by J.W. Mordy

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to thank, first and foremost, the Oklahomans whose personalities and adventures inspired me to write *Summer of Excess*. You know who you are and I thank you for filling my life with the lessons, love, and laughter you can only find in kindred spirits. I wouldn't survive without you. I would also like to thank Dr. Givan for heading my committee and helping me to reach the end despite all obstacles. The journey proved a truly unearned affirmation in itself.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT OF THESIS.	v
INTRODUCTION OF THESIS.	vi
<i>SUMMER OF EXCESS.</i>	1
CHAPTER 1.	2
CHAPTER 2.	34
CHAPTER 3.	52
CHAPTER 4.	70
CHAPTER 5.	85
CHAPTER 6.	106
CHAPTER 7.	113
CHAPTER 8.	122
CHAPTER 9.	131
CHAPTER 10.	146
CHAPTER 11.	156
CHAPTER 12.	173
CHAPTER 13.	185
CHAPTER 14.	199
CHAPTER 15.	207
CHAPTER 16.	218
CHAPTER 17.	230

ABSTRACT OF THESIS

AUTHOR: Kassidi Growall

TITLE: Summer of Excess

DIRECTOR OF THESIS: Dr. Christopher F. Givan

PAGES: 250

On graduation day in May 2013, Olivia "Liv" Grigsby and her three friends have a rowdy night that endangers Liv's pot operation. The friends help to keep one another in good spirits as they encounter unexpected opportunities and problems over the next few weeks: Charlie enters the porn industry, Merrick can't find a job after receiving her Master's, and Delaney is arrested for graffiti. When Liv's father dies, the friends come together and face their predicaments head on as they encounter the excess of their past, handle the trials of the present, and work towards securing their future. The novel works to capture the dialect and hectic lives of the four Oklahoma women. It depicts true bliss as well as escalated anxiety as the friends recklessly help one another sort out their relationships and solve the impending issues of their careers.

INTRODUCTION TO THESIS

Summer of Excess is a novel about four friends, two of which have just graduated from a university in Oklahoma. The four women help one another sort out their relationships and solve the impending issues of their careers. Overall, the novel carries a comic tone, but the darker tone of satire is also present. The satire, while possibly targeted at modern society, is also directed at the characters who have the tendency to make bad decisions.

The central character is Olivia Jean Grigsby, a twenty-eight-year-old who finds herself experimenting with both genders as attractive partners. She has the Peace Corp in mind to follow graduation but must withstand the crises and adventures that she and her friends encounter within the first few weeks of the summer. The reader soon learns that Livvy, as she is called by some, risks the chance of prison as she is selling small quantities of homegrown marijuana to help pay her student loan debt.

Olivia's best friend is Merrick Lillian Jessup, who graduates with her Masters in nutrition. Her goal is to move back to her home state of New Mexico in pursuit of a lucrative internship. Merrick also looks forward to all the fun she'll have being single and partying to her heart's content; but we learn during a mushroom trip that that plan

gets derailed. We will watch a series of unforeseen events unfold putting her on an entirely different path.

Charlie Trip is one of Olivia's two roommates. A thirty-one-year-old divorcée, she's dedicated her life to her daycare, Chigger Sitters, which she runs with her friend Hadley Hill. We find that she is unhappy with her career choice and devastated by the disappointment that has followed years of hard work. It is not until Chigger Sitters is unexpectedly burned down that she gets a chance to reinvent her career in the sex entertainment industry.

Delaney Marks is the third roommate living with Charlie and Olivia. Delaney is a lesbian starving artist whose passion has turned to graffiti. She struggles with having a mediocre relationship with her online Montanan girlfriend, Molly, while having feelings for two other women who are within the local proximity. An arrest for graffiti leads to a job opportunity for Delaney painting a mural in the new club OUT, but she must work against the clock to make the opening night deadline.

While the form of my creative works varies from poetry to screenplay, I consistently rely on the devices of comedy and satire to get readers to enjoy unpleasant topics through humorous pleasantries. Jonathan Swift's, *A Modest Proposal*, and Joseph Heller's, *Catch-22*, are a couple of

satirical works that have resonated with me over the years. In order to write *Summer of Excess*, I chose to focus on Jessica Blau's, *Summer of the Naked Swim Parties* (2008), and *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010), by Jennifer Eagan. Jessica Blau's protagonist, fourteen-year-old Jamie, allows us to see and experience things as a teenager in California. This was helpful for me to see how Blau uses an older version of Jamie to look back on being fourteen and give a personal but reflective account of what happened the summer of 1976. Jamie's internal, as well as external struggles, play into one another and really allows us to fill her shoes comfortably.

Jennifer Eagan's novel is inspiring in that it not only violates the chronological ordering of the story but also in her effortless way of leaping from points of view among a connected group of people, allowing you to get more than just one person's side of the story. The leaping also keeps the reader from being able to make an assessment as to who the main character actually is. The structure of her novel was imperative in the organization of my own chapters, which jump from the four points of view consistently.

The title, *Summer of Excess*, comes from William Blake's quote, "The road of excess leads to the palace of

wisdom," which I open the first chapter with. His quote encompasses not only the story's beginning of four girls living in the excess of secularity, but also reflects upon the commonsense that Livvy arrives at after surviving what the life of excess hurls toward her. I imitate the concept of what Norman Podhoretz calls the "unearned affirmation" of characters by having sudden resolutions that keep the heroines from facing jail time to the extent that one of the characters comes into enough money to pay off her exceeding \$60,000 student loan debt.

The highest hurdle I encountered while writing *Summer of Excess* was establishing a ticking time clock in the plotline for each of my characters and controlling the momentum and dramatic action of each chapter. What helped was a suggestion from the head of my committee, Dr. Givan. He advised writing out a summary of each chapter until I had mapped the entirety of events. Then, all I had to do was return to each chapter and put flesh on the bones.

Fiction, being the best avenue to experience a life one would normally not encounter, is the way to bridge the gap between yourself and what you don't understand, what you've yet to discover. In a nutshell, I aimed to make it enjoyable to know what it's like being a modern late-twenty-something in Oklahoma through a hybridic collection

of comical stories saturated in a soap like drama, it's what I know best for the time being.

Summer of Excess

The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom.

- William Blake

1

Had Olivia Jean Grigsby known she would lose her father in the summer of 2013, she would have been more enthusiastic and compliant to her parents' wishes to see her walk the stage at her graduation ceremony. Instead, she informed her family that it was a waste of time and money to celebrate an accomplishment, her masters with summa cum laude status, which she felt to be inadequate, and spent the eve of graduation drinking whiskey gingers on the rooftop of the Oklahoma City Art Museum, listening to a blues band and becoming acquainted with a fresh nutrition major, a twenty-two year old sparkling redhead named Jackson Hane. Jackson had green eyes that cinched upward when she smiled big, stretching the freckles across her cheekbones. She was the first girl Olivia had ever been attracted to and when Jackson touched her lower back, Olivia felt a rush of electricity flood straight to her clit.

Her lifelong best friend, Merrick Jessup, also a nutrition major, though a graduate, was Olivia's way into the health enthusiast party. The two friends rarely got to

see each other over their last semester since both were frantically writing their theses and scavenging for jobs. Neither had heard from anyone and both were becoming anxious.

Olivia knew Merrick was aiming to move back to New Mexico, where the majority of her family lived and a prestigious nutrition internship was up for grabs. Knowing they would soon part ways made Olivia antsy; not necessarily to get on with her life in the same fashion as Merrick, but that there should be a looming something, anything, creeping towards her doorstep. She stirred her drink as she watched the sunset leak its last rays for the day across downtown Oklahoma City and listened to Merrick as she told Jackson of their friendship.

"Livvy Jean, do you remember the time you beat me to that party and it turned out to be full of underage kids? It was ridiculous, Jackson. The cops showed up and Liv, being the only one of age, decides to jump four fences and fight off dogs to escape being arrested. I was still driving around the neighborhood trying to find the place when I see her leap over this iron wrought fence like a fuckin' pole vaulter. She dove into my car and just yelled, 'Go! Go!'"

"Olivia, or do you prefer Liv?" Jackson asked, "Why wouldn't you just pretend to be underage?"

Olivia had wandered into a trance regarding that night. She was twenty-two at the time. A week before her fresh-from-the-closet, gay friend, Mickey Redd made his "gaybut debut," he had gotten arrested just outside of her abode. The Edmond police were stalking her because they believed she was dealing drugs out of her party ridden townhouse. This wasn't true yet, but when they pulled Mickey over, they found a long lost nugget of marijuana in an empty Marlboro pack, forgotten in the back of his Jeep.

"Well, I go by whatever, but most people call me Liv. The Edmond cops had a false idea about who I was at the time and I just didn't want to deal with it so I bailed."

"Is bailing a strong suit for you?"

Merrick almost spewed her beer across the table, "Fuck yeah it is. Livvy's got it down to an art."

This was true about Liv and so she returned no argument but a smirk and set her focus back on the indigo sky that was slowly tucking in the warm orange pink rays for the night. At 28, Olivia had grown capable of seeing things through, but had acquired a habit and reputation for slipping out of or cutting off situations that she no longer saw reparable. Speeding tickets, confrontations,

financial setbacks, rotted friendships and relationships had all led to Liv's organization of situational evaluations; some of which she would recycle and reuse, others would wind up tossed in the trash and carried out every Thursday morning.

"Liv's a phenomenal writer. She writes sex poems, horror stories, makes pamphlets about merkins. It's hilarious."

"That's amazing! What do you plan to do now that you've graduated?"

Liv looked at both women for a time. Merrick also had long red hair but with bangs cut short and tapered to sweep the buttes of her eyebrows. The two were similarly skinny but Merrick was half a foot taller than Jackson and had large, cartoon round, blue eyes that popped out at you when you had her full attention. For the past six months, there was no question Olivia hated more than this because while she knew she could write, and did very well, she had no idea what she was going to do. The mental distress and uneasiness about her future blanketed her like a cocoon she couldn't be metamorphosed out of.

"Hopefully write. I'm currently finishing up the final draft of my thesis, which is a novel about a young serial

killer, before I send it out to see if I can get it published."

The two redheads grinned and nodded with excitement. Jackson took a swig of her beer and placed her hand on Liv's arm. "We should get out of here and hit up a bar. Do you guys like Edna's? We can pound some lunchboxes!"

Ordering a drink at Edna's is comparable to struggling at the waterhole in the middle of a busy Sahara. It's the best box in town, and harder to obtain than the clap on a Thirsty Thursday, or a weekend. Liv hated hanging in the sardined bar for longer than a drink and would usually dart across the four lanes of North Classen to the Hilo or Drunken Fry after guzzling the lunchbox, and cap her night off watching drag shows and observing the leather jacket rioters of OKC. Jackson, however, found some people she knew and decided to nest. This meant that Liv and Merrick would stick around to feel out the night and hopefully Liv would feel up Jackson behind the solo curtain closed bathroom stall.

Merrick went back up to the bar to get another round while Liv kept dibs on their table. Liv watched her friend sit in the center, the only barstool open, just a blink before she disappeared behind some khaki douche lords wearing snugger sweater vests than Carlton Banks. Jackson

was still chatting with her friends at the end of the bar. Over at one of the two pool tables, a guy wearing a Sooner shirt stared down Olivia before setting down his pool cue and striding over.

"Need a drink?"

"Nah, thanks. My friend is grabbing me one." Olivia pulled out a pack of cigarettes and matches from her purse and lit one. This usually warded off any boring good ol' boys but the guy sat down instead.

The guy insisted, "I'll keep ya company 'til she gets back."

Olivia frenched the smoke before streaming it out her dragon nostrils, never taking her eyes off this guy. "Cancer sticks make fine company." She lit a match and watched it burn down to her fingers.

"You seem angry. I'm Zach." He stuck his hand out just as Liv caught Jackson watching in the corner of her eye. She smiled brilliantly and shook his hand, never looking in Jackson's direction and pointed at the bug zapper that could easily be seen outside through the glass patio door before lighting another match, "Zach, do you think the light zaps flies for pleasure or out of annoyance?"

Zach turned and watched a mosquito be zapped and drop, "I think it does what it's made to do, zap anything that touches it."

Olivia leaned in so that her face was only five inches away and allowed a few curls to fall across her cheek, "Then I suggest you hear what the metaphor tells you before you too fall to the cement."

Olivia leaned back, striking a third match and held it up to her so as to focus on the depth of the flame. The match sequence started in high school after a boy refused to process the obvious rejection lines Liv had thrown at him while she, Merrick, and some friends were smoking under the bleachers at a football game. He had lunged at her, kissing her neck and running his hands under her varsity fleece jacket. Merrick didn't have time to think before Liv snapped. She shoved him back just enough to fake him with her left hook and bloody his face with an open palm to the nose. She remembered feeling the nasal bone dip into the skull and jerking back, conscious that she could kill him if she followed through. Her father, Rob Grigsby, had taught her the basics of wrestling, self-defense, and pressure points, which is what every girl should be taught; no one thought Liv would catch on so naturally. Liv

discovered she could bury her fury by lighting matches and essentially letting the fire get angry for her.

When she looked up, Zach had returned to his pool cue and Merrick was sitting in his place, eyes cartoon wide, "Livvy, you're lighting matches."

"I was just warding off a Sooner, born and bred." Liv took up her lunchbox and cheered to Merrick, "Here's to us accomplishing things!" The two downed the creamsicle combinations of beer, amaretto, and orange juice.

Jackson had slid into the chair closest to Olivia while they finished them and rubbed her shoulder; "You look pretty foxy when you're getting hit on. Are you gay?"

Liv also hated this question but loved watching Jackson's green eyes shine like stones underwater, "I think labels are bullshit. You're attracted to whom you're attracted to. It doesn't matter."

Jackson asked, "Have you ever been with a girl before?"

"I haven't been attracted to one before," Liv replied.

Jackson leaned into Liv, rubbing her nose against her cheek, "Are you attracted to me?"

"Do I have to say it for you to know it?" Liv smirked and played with Jackson's red hair.

Jackson's cheeks flushed, "I'd really like to hang out sometime. Maybe you could give me guitar lessons."

Liv's heart pounded and her skin felt like she was covered in icy hot, "Well you have my number so just let me know."

Jackson beamed and shot up, jetting back to her friends. Liv looked over at Merrick, who was grinning up to her ears, "Lezbehonest, I still think you're straight, but you trying out lesbianism is super entertaining."

The next morning, Liv shot upright from the sweaty knots her body had formed within Merrick's suede couch and down comforter. In one breath, she drew in the whiskey oozing from her pores and in a torpid haze she peeled the comforter from her flushed body.

Hot. Fucking hot.

She staggered and swayed her way to the kitchen flaying off her shirt and bra in a half panicked stupor. Streaked memories of the art museum, bars, and encounters from the night before flashed sporadically within her head. Olivia filled a glass from the counter with water, chugged it, and collapsed tits up on the biting tile floor. The tangled events began to unscramble onto the eggshell popcorn ceiling like a planetarium projector.

"Geez Olivia, somebody's nips are perky." Merrick came in wearing only a matching set of paisley underwear and began refilling the glass with water. As she tossed back the drink, her fox red hair tumbled down over her ginger freckled shoulders, the ends briskly sweeping the middle of her back, where her peacock feather tattoo lazed.

"Fuck off, Merrick." Olivia remembered holding her hand during the fit Merrick's mother, Emily, tried to throw before breaking down in sobs when she first saw the tattoo. Merrick was only sixteen and had talked her father into it the day her grandma, Nonnie, died. Nonnie's floral arrangements were never without peacock feathers. Nonnie said they added the touch of grace and elegance flowers lacked. Liv sat up and took another glass Merrick had filled for her.

"Well excuse me, Liv. I puked earlier," Merrick said, "what a way to start graduation day." She hoisted herself onto the kitchen counter, pale spotted legs dangling and began digging in the cabinets behind her head for sustenance. "Are you gonna put those slutty tits away anytime soon Livvy Jean?"

"Merri Lill, I woke up half melted. Give the girls a minute." Liv had returned to her splattered position on the kitchen floor. Her brown corkscrew mane was soaked in

streaks and clung to her face and neck, which was now fading in color from pink to milk, goose bumps slowly standing. Liv's tattoos seemed to reach with her as she lengthened and stretched her skin and bones body. Her moonlit praying mantis tattoo spread over the right half of her ribcage as she drew in a deep breath and with the exhale came a loud bellowing bawl that overflowed the apartment like a bear's roar erupts out of a cave. This was the way Liv had always greeted her days.

"You really are soaked," Merrick began eating a peanut butter oatmeal bar, "I'm surprised you're not totally naked. Ulysses must be dying in that swamp you call a crotch."

Ulysses was the name her friends dubbed to Liv's vagina because of the unruly downstairs drapes, which matched the curly curtains that sat atop her head, not unlike the famous general, nor the protagonist of the Odyssey. Olivia enjoyed the fact that she could grow a gnarly bush between her legs and often thought if she were a man, she'd have a beard just as burly. After a scarring round of locker room years, where Liv was a pale fruitless twig in a flood of fully bloomed and tan naked teenage dreams, she now embraced her late blooms and enjoyed flaunting them at any chance. Ulysses came upon her leading

a group of thirty people stark naked, with the exception of a skin colored swim cap that made her look like a fetus, to the apartment pool at three in the morning, her drunk and disorderly bush leading the way.

"Ulysses is too hung over to give a damn if he breathes."

"Maybe if you'd trim his beard, breathing wouldn't be an issue."

"Oh please, if you take away a man's beard you take away the ferocious confidence he hides behind." Liv had finally managed to stand upright although she was leaning against the fridge and had knocked off a couple of coupons. "Besides, I'm against slaying the rainforest."

"Fair enough. Did your phone blow up after we left Edna's? That guy called me three times!" Merrick's attention had veered to her phone and was viciously swiping messages left and right.

Olivia began to remember the events that took place at Edna's, "Which guy? Do you not remember sucking face with pink polo douche then swapping for the metalocalyptic dunnoifhesahomo guy two feet away? For the record, I bet he is."

"You bet who is what?" Merrick asked without looking up from her phone, "Vince? Vince isn't gay."

"He was drinking piña coladas all night and has purple unicorn gauges." Olivia dryly cut back, "I've got more manliness in my clit than he has in his peen."

"Your vagina is named after epic heroes." Merrick shook a spoon at Liv and then, remembering what today would bring, asked, "Why can't you change your mind and walk at graduation today?"

"First of all," Liv began counting fingers, "I didn't register, I don't have the money to pay for that shit, and my parents would freak if I walked without them there, plus I hated my high school graduation."

Merrick scoffed, "You only hated it because Mrs. C caught you trying to wear your light up shoes and made you wear heels instead." She began picking up the trash from the night before, "How do you expect to afford your student loan payments if you can't cough up the doll hairs for a cap and gown?"

Liv smiled, "Not sure but I've got six months to figure it out."

"You better come up with something before the debt comes knockin'." Merrick dumped the trash into the can under the sink, "I have to start some clothes."

Merrick went into the laundry room down the hall and Liv started gathering her scattered sweat soaked

belongings. She disregarded her bra and threw on the baggy Arizona inspired sweater from the night before, which reeked of cigarettes, body odor, and McDonald's cheeseburgers, her late night last attempt for hangover survival.

"Dude, you seen my shoes?" Liv asked.

"You went barefoot after Edna's." Merrick thought for a moment, "My car maybe? Have you heard from Jackson? I can't believe she disappeared after getting all cozy with you."

Recap moments flashed through Liv's mind of the blues band on the rooftop of the Oklahoma City Art Museum and she found herself touching her ankles. All the dancing with Jackson had blistered her feet bloody, "Figures. If she wants to hang out she'll call." Feeling the pain of night long searing friction, she grabbed Merrick's keys and went to check the Honda for the shoe left behind, leaving Merrick to her laundry.

Hung over Liv never dared to step outside without sunglasses. The cool spring breeze paused just long enough for the early summer rays to warm what the wind had cooled. She was enraptured with the way the air wrapped around her body freely when she didn't wear a bra. Olivia's first years were full of shirtless summers in the trailer park

her family lived in outside of Jenks, OK. When she was six, they moved south to live with her "holier than they used to be" grandparents in Ardmore and the shirtless summers were no longer allowed for she and her sister, Regan.

"Damn infer orating tits." Liv shoved her six-year-old self to the depths of her mind as she opened the passenger door. No shoe. She dipped under and dug all around the Civic, which Merrick kept so clean an obsessive-compulsive extremist would be proud. Nothing. Liv thought they might as well be with Jackson, putting a twisted version of Cinderella in her head. After an exasperated sigh, Liv headed back to find the shoe had been under the couch she slept in and was now in her snickering ginger friend's hands.

"Story of your life, huh? Remember that one time in junior high, you stole the extra wristbands for the eighth grade take home babies in Home Ec. so you could cut yours off and no one would know you'd abandoned your baby for basketball?" Merrick barreled over, joint in one hand, shoe in another. Liv swiped both from her friend and took a long drag, holding it in as long as possible before being taken over by a series of tiny tense coughs.

She remembered the instance so well she imagined the shaking, crying, plastic baby in her arms, while trying to

force the key attached to her band into the infant's back. *Fuck this.* She had thought and proceeded to the Home Economics room to find the stash of key bands, which were supposed to be worn constantly during the duration of your "parenting." If they were cut off, you failed the assignment. Her mother and father had opposing reactions to her failing grade, and Liv's lack of shits to give. Her mother, Quinn Grigsby, made it clear she was completely mortified and embarrassed that her eldest didn't care about a crying doll. Her father, Rob Grigsby, told Liv that he would have done the same kind of "Parenting."

"And I was golden until someone saw your sixth grade ass with my baby at a basketball game! What a foretelling metaphor for my will-never-be motherhood. I gotta head out and go on my run." Liv snatched her bra and purse and half hugged her childhood friend while she inhaled a substantial amount of smoke.

"I love you! Give baby Alec a kiss for me-Oh, and tell Delaney and Charlie..."

"Tell 'em what?" Olivia noticed a glimpse of panic in Merrick's face.

"I say hi! See you at graduation you anti-graduation graduate! Geez, only a writer would be that ironic."

Merrick quickly shut the front door. Liv shrugged off the awkward lapse and headed for the parking lot.

According to Bradley Nowell, it was summertime and the livin' was easy. Liv pulled onto her street in Edmond, Oklahoma, blaring reggae love onto the semi-overgrown yards of Robin Hill Drive. The neighborhood was diversely lower class: poor families, retired baby boomers and fellow college students, complete with the crack house at the end of the street. Liv felt completely at home here; a neighborhood of average angry Americans just getting by. One house even had a cow in the backyard. Liv had never seen the cow but had heard it mooing on her thrashing sessions with her roommate Delaney Marks, where Delaney would carve up the streets on her long board and Liv would scoot on her twelve-dollar thrift store Razor. Delaney often referred to Liv as Shakespeare since her lack of balance left her too shaky to successfully ride anything other than the scooter. Delaney, of course, went by Shredder.

As Liv got out of her car she heard her roommates' dogs whining and bellowing within.

Liv Grigsby and her two girlfriends, Charlie Trip and Delaney Marks, lived in the gray brick house Charlie had won in her divorce over eight years ago. They met working

several years ago at Pops, a glorified gas station carrying over seven hundred kinds of soda on the edge of Arcadia, a Route 66 town with no stoplights, no public school, and a population of 251. The mortgage was split between the three while they shared the house with three dogs: Dangle, Porkchop, and Wheezer, and a hermit crab named Georgie.

Olivia loved her roommates. They were her core, her home base, and her bone marrow. Liv never allowed her parents to know her completely, as her friends did, and after weeding through a garden's worth of bad acquaintances and stale friendships, she was relieved to have found the crux she could always come home to and shed her worries without censored concern. They shared her curiosity for something beyond what they saw to be the stagnant American dream. Eight to five with a family didn't sound fulfilling to them yet. They didn't know the risks they were going to take in attaining their contentment would lead to a heavy mixture of good times and unlucky occurrences. Sometimes Liv considered the fact that her group consumed more drugs than they produced accomplishments but welcomed the opportunities as extra-curricular and validated them as something most creative departments encouraged.

Delaney Marks had met Liv a few times before she was hired as a waitress at Pops. They shared the common ground

of being Mary Jane devotees, Karen O fanatics, and having boyfriends they needed to cut ties with. Since then, Olivia had watched Delaney come out of the closet to her family and friends in order to embrace her lesbianism. Sexuality, as she'd explained to Jackson, was something Liv believed to be incapable of labeling. To her, restricting your body from exploration just because it makes others uncomfortable didn't make sense; you liked who you liked and should embrace attraction as it comes because it doesn't come frequently.

Liv's other roommate, Charlie Trip, was precisely that: a trip. Charlie had met the two while working at Pops, although she had left to open a daycare and spent her days playing, napping, and arguing with one to four year olds. As a result, she would argue with Liv and Delaney relentlessly, making hypothetical cases for how to keep uteruses from falling out of old women's vaginas, why merkins are called merkins, or yesterday's Charlie subject, "All I'm sayin' is that when the end of the world comes and you can't get your contacts refilled, I'm the one that's gonna be able to run in a straight line." Charlie was a picky eater and since Liv loved to cook it gave her a headache to avoid certain things when she knew Charlie would be home: vegetables, fish, Great Value cheese, and

any off-brand of anything. Instead of grumbling, she would see the meal as a challenge and began sneaking in rejected ingredients just so she could prove Charlie would eat certain things.

Liv opened the front door and the dogs ran out. They jumped and panted and peed out of excitement, making coming home a *Hey Arnold* experience every time. She wasn't three steps in when Delaney came around the corner yelling; "Shut the fuck up!" Short blonde hair was heaped on the top of her pale head like a moussed lost boy and her beryl blue eyes sank, like teeth into your soul when she was anxious then became vicious when angry.

When the two roommates first met, Del was dating Liv's friend, Ed, a salt and peppered Indian guitar god, and was still denying the fact that she was a lesbian. Shortly after becoming best friends, Delaney had an affair with a spoon-fed psychotic Scorpio named Regina and showed up on Liv's doorstep covered in hickeys, two hours before Ed was supposed to get home from his band's six-month tour. The two tried everything Google suggested: copper pennies, rubber erasers, ice, and four different kinds of cover up, but nothing worked. Ed was so self-involved he didn't even notice them. After two more weeks of overlooked hickeys, Delaney ended it with the musical genius and let her affair

with the deadly Regina continue for two years; a treacherous decision that would eventually put all of Delaney's friendships on ice until she discovered Regina was sleeping with a sweaty Puerto Rican named Luis.

Held in Delaney's arms was beautiful Baby Alec. Alec, also known as Baby A, had cocoa eyes and hair that matched his mother, Micah, who also worked at Pops and would drop off Alec before the lunch shift.

Liv spotted a blunt tucked behind Delaney's ear and snatched it.

"Yeah get that shit goin' and I'll bag up the goods for your run." Delaney said, "Oh an' you've got snail mail. How was the night out with the nutritious people?"

Liv flipped through the stack of mail left on the entryway table. Delaney was the only roommate to retrieve the mail from the box outside. Liv noticed a letter from the Peace Corps, which she had applied for the past fall and tucked it underneath the sorted stack delivered for Olivia Jean Grigsby.

"It's still putting itself together. Ads, coupons, and Sallie Mae." Olivia stuffed the stack of envelopes in her purse.

"Sallie Mae huh, what's she want?" Delaney took the blunt from her friend and began blowing O's through the foyer.

"To remind me she owns me down to the kidneys until I pay her back for getting educated."

"How bad is that shit?" Delaney asked.

"Really bad, considering everything I learned and didn't learn. I'm over sixty grand." Liv ran her fingers through her knotted mass of hair and threw it into a bun.

"Fucker! You better get to runnin'."

Delaney was the only friend Liv felt comfortable enough discussing her mountain of financial debt. Liv saw the debt as a black cloud that followed her from a distance, waiting for this day of graduation to pour out its murky water on her head. Liv pushed it to the back of her mind. The storm couldn't hit just yet. She diverted her attention to Baby Alec.

"No shit, huh, Baby A? Aunt Livvy's gotta make some dough."

Liv no longer worked at Pops but sold weed for extra cash while being a full time graduate student. Baby Alec would usually accompany her on her runs in the park, strapped in the front baby pack Charlie had purchased on a Groupon shopping spree.

"How many today?" Delaney stuffed the fresh green nuggets in empty granola bar wrappers and sealed them with clear Scotch tape.

"Just give me six." Liv answered. "I have the usual five but Franco's got a friend coming. We'll see if he shows."

"With the debt you're in, you better hope so."

Most dealers have you come over to their house and camp for thirty minutes to avoid portraying the obvious pick up session. Others meet you at a sketchy 7-11, pretending to run into you, giving a terrible side slap five where the bag is dropped or someone isn't quite ready and all you look is white, awkward and stupid.

Mitch Park was a 280-acre smorgasbord of mediocre outdoor activity complete with a skate park, frisbee golf park, ball park, amphitheater, recreation center, and a five-mile maze trail with stop offs for bird watching. With three ways to enter the park it was easy for Liv to make pit stops on her runs to meet customers while having no one to track her progress.

Carrying Baby Alec in the baby pack also helped her to blend in with the rich, snotty, yoga addicted jogger moms that somehow appeared perfect but latched onto our skinny Liv with lingering stares as she ran shirtless with baby in

tow. Liv believed underneath their high end workout gear were spanx to keep their overly tan, wrinkled flab fest from flapping down at the asphalt trail and like an unspoken vice, they all did it, but each of them thought they were the sole genius fooling everyone but their husbands.

The trail snaked through every section of the park, making it easy for a variety of customers to have an excuse to be there, especially during the summer. She stopped at hole 7 to duck into the few smoke holes on the frisbee park, the skate park was always a must, and then she collaborated with Ernie, the pothead birdwatcher, who believed it was only appropriate to be as high as his hobby.

She rushed up the hill and into the clearing, approaching a large bleached stump that stood at six feet, casting its shadow on a park bench, where Ricky had parked himself. Ricky sat in his guilt racket sunglasses, his knee bobbing furiously. By looks alone, Liv thought Ricky was the type to never delve deeper than the waist and imagined that his wrong and right commitments were tracked like a karma bank account in a brown leather book and he kept his place with a braided string of faded pink, turquoise and blue.

Liv knew him by Franco's description: an exaggerated jaw line and his tendency to wear those awkward skele-toe shoes and shitty band t-shirts. Franco was Liv's ex-boyfriend and main supplier until a few weeks ago when the secret field she and her siblings, Regan and Ben, had been working on for two years had finally reached its prime. The field was tucked away in the most difficult to reach and least visited stretch of their parents' 90-acre farm. Liv hadn't told Franco where she was getting her weed from and had only told him, that she had to stop since she was about to graduate and find a "real job." This led to tension between the two and Liv took Franco's passing on of Ricky as a customer to be a peace offering. Ricky was sporting neon green skele-toes accompanied by a yellow Head Automatica tee and as Liv approached him she recognized him.

"You don't know what you do to me." Liv stopped and crashed her ass onto the park bench, tickling Baby Alec, still strapped in his baby pack, into a cheese so wide his shark sunglasses lifted off the tops of his cheeks.

Ricky forced a laugh and while adjusting his own sunglasses, looked around. Liv smirked, "Want some granola?" Ricky shot up in standing shock, his logic

widened his eyes, "You can't," he sat, "you can't sell drugs with a baby."

"I'm not selling you drugs, nor am I selling you a baby. I'm merely offering you granola." Liv projected a relaxed disposition naturally, wholly convincing to Ricky.

"Oh. Well. I thought." Ricky fidgeted and watched the surroundings.

Liv asked repulsively, "I mean what person in their right mind would sell drugs with a baby?"

"Right. Exactly. I shouldn't have assumed. I don't know why I assumed that." Ricky fumbled with his headphones.

Liv smirked, "Probably because I offered you granola, which is what Franco told you I'd say."

Liv could see Ricky's logic try to bounce around the expanding embarrassment that continued to fill his thoughts and redden his face. Forehead slap.

"But hey I don't sell babies, just so we're clear." Liv slung back a smile as Ricky's mouth tightened like a snake coiling in a corner. She liked to toy with guys when they looked nervous, though she would eventually learn it wasn't always a great way to start off with someone. With no one in sight, he pulled out three worn twenties with three Andrew Jacksons staring at the sun. Liv shook her

head, stood, and kicked Ricky in the calf, immediately following with a kiss on the cheek where she snatched the money and shoved an eighth into Ricky's pant pocket in one muscle memory motion.

"Don't call me again until you can handle the unexpected and mind your manners." Liv ran away with the indifferent Baby Alec, leaving a wincing Ricky to watch their bouncing heads disappear down a wooded path.

Liv couldn't stop grinning as she ran through the winding path leading up to the skate park. She loved the feeling of embarrassing men, probably because the men in her family were relentless in their own chidings. "Carry wit or eat shit" was what Ben, Liv's younger brother, had dubbed as the Grigsby male motto. Liv was often made fun of by her uncles and cousins for being so independent.

At the last family reunion, the last time she had seen most of her family, she had just graduated high school and chopped off her hair into a short bob that she often afroed out, and was being grilled about marriage and continuing the generations. The Grigsby clan had a tradition of never having less than five generations alive; the family photos were endless.

When Liv had informed the fellows that she had different goals to achieve before considering the

tradition, her Uncle Scott couldn't resist, "Livvy Jean, you know writing isn't going to provide for you. You'll need another income, you may as well look to settling down and just write for shits and giggles, focus on what matters. Don't you want your grandparents to see their great grandbabies?" At that age, Livvy Jean's temper still snapped frequently, especially when anyone tried to tell her how to live her life, which happened frequently, "If they want to see them, they'll have to stick around for another twenty years." Her Uncle Scott, an electrician for Michelin Tires, leaned in not six inches from Liv's face, "In twenty years you ain't gonna be worth it. Your tits'll be saggin' and the wrinkles will set in. Especially if you keep that nigger hairdo up, nobody's gonna wanna touch that. You should think about what the boys like."

Liv could feel the blood pulse in the vein that surged from her forehead anytime she was upset, "I don't give a damn what the boys think. If someone wants to be all in they'll like me regardless of my saggy tits. Making my vagina the Holland Tunnel isn't on my list of things to do before I die. Get it?" With that, Liv walked out of the family reunion and wouldn't see Uncle Scott again, until one murky day in the coming June.

Liv clicked back into the present and realized that since she'd passed the skate park, a cop on a bike had been following her. She had already made all of her stops and had no weed on her, but she thought about the three hundred and sixty dollars she had tucked away in her sports bra side pocket. The cop pulled up beside her and began to roll along with her, "Beautiful isn't it?"

"Oh yeah, it's great." Liv began to fiddle with the strap of Alec's baby pack.

"You mind taking a break over there?" The cop asked, "I need to ask you a few questions."

Liv's heart rate skyrocketed. She had been arrested before for paraphernalia, years after the Edmond police had stalked her, believing she was a drug dealer. She was wasted that cold January 4th of 2010, and was such a smartass to that cop, the fact that she'd been drinking all night never appeared to him because she'd hit all the right nerves to make him furious.

When he had finally put her in the back of the car, Liv heard Lil' Wayne bragging about getting his Kush from California and his dro from Arizona. All Olivia could do was laugh and when the cop got in on his side she blew, "For a cop you sure do contradict yourself by jammin' to Lil' Wayne." He never replied and Liv laughed harder every

time he whipped a corner, sending her flying to the other side of back seat.

The bike cop was older, mid-forties with a molester moustache and his tight biker shorts had wedged their way up in the front, making his floppy bulge stuck to his right thigh. Liv was thankful she had sunglasses on. She adjusted Baby Alec while the cop parked his bike.

"Do you have any ID on you miss?"

"No sir, I left it in the car."

He pulled out a small flip pad and pen, "What's your name?"

"Merrick Jessup." Anytime Liv told the Edmond police her real name, she was searched as soon as they pulled her up.

"Well I see you out running quite a bit with your youngster and we've had some tips about some drug deals going on out here." His sunglasses kept sliding down his nose while he wrote Merrick's name down and was shoving them back up with his middle finger every three letters.

"What? Should I be worried?" Olivia knew if she played up the southern white girl accent and portrayed herself as the typical good girl Okie, everything would be fine, and squeezed Baby A with an affectionate hug of concern.

"Well no," the cop replied, "we've decided to keep two cops biking through during the busier hours so there are people watching. I was mainly wondering if you had seen anything."

Liv shook her head, "You know, sir, I really just zone out while I'm running, and I recognize the regulars but I keep to myself mainly."

"Is that why you were taking a break to talk to that younger gentleman on the bench? He wasn't really dressed for any sort of park activity."

Liv felt a surge of adrenaline and took a quiet breath in, "Oh yeah, I know him from school and just thought I'd say hi. He said he was waiting on some girl he's dating."

The cop smirked, "So is that why you kicked him and kissed him."

Her brain couldn't stop trying to think where the cop had been sitting and if he'd seen the money Ricky had whipped out. Liv prided herself on always being aware of her surroundings, "Yeah, he's a real dick."

The cop smiled and said, "Well I'm glad he got a good kickin' then. Here's my card. If you wouldn't mind keeping your eyes peeled and letting me know if you notice anything questionable I'd really appreciate it. And most guys are dicks if that's any reconciliation."

Well done, Liv thought to herself, "Of course Officer...Trout, thank you. I will keep my eyes up and watching. Take care of yourself."

Officer Trout hopped back onto his bike without picking his frontal wedgie and rode on. Liv watched him roll away and felt the adrenaline follow him, leaving her to finally feel the weight of what had happened.

2

When Charlie Trip pulled into the driveway on Robin Hill in her rose red Mustang, she had the cream top down to let the warm May breeze flow wherever. She smoked a joint disguised as a cigarette as she discussed plans over the phone with her friend and assistant, Hadley. The two had been working all day at their pre-K childcare center, Chigger Sitters. Charlie had opened it up three years prior, when she was twenty-eight, and had absolutely adored the children. She had believed that it was her lifelong mission to help little ones prepare for elementary school, but had lost the feeling of fulfillment along the way.

Now at thirty-one, she felt that she had something to give to the world beyond educating its future inhabitants. Already married for two years and divorced for eight, Charlie was still struggling to desire someone again. She had labored over her first marriage to the point of depletion. It was the second and last year of their marriage when she discovered her husband, Bart, was a regular member of a fetish orgy, getting tootsie rolls shoved up his ass so that others could eat them as he shat them out every Tuesday and Thursday night.

This wouldn't have been a big deal had she not been dropping him off and picking him up every Tuesday and Thursday night for his graduate classes that he wasn't going to, that he wasn't even enrolled in, that he had completely made up.

Trust had been completely ripped out of her dictionary. She tried dating every now and then but couldn't bring herself to give into anything more than a couple of dates. As a result, Charlie was a bottle of sexual repression, fizzing slowly to the point of eruption. Little did she know, the extent of dicey sexcapades her muffled muffler would lead to and, in a way, finish her off.

The top forty bass was so loud the rearview mirror couldn't stop blurring out of your focus and this was how Charlie multitasked her every day. She lowered her leopard print sunglasses just enough to catch a glimpse of the hot piece of fresh cut man mowing the grass across the street before her auburn bangs fell over her eyes. She had been ogling the college kid ever since that first shirtless lawn day in March.

"Damn, bend over baby. Hmm, Hadley? Yeah, that sounds good. Tell everyone to head over around seven while Liv is still at Merrick's graduation. Bring food or beer and we'll

have kabobs and brats going. The Grigsbys will be here too, so be in Sunday school mode and keep the hanky-panky low key until they head home." Her voluptuous breasts bounced as she tee heed into the phone and she brushed her kinky wave locks behind her golden shoulders.

Charlie knew Liv's parents had been left in the cold regarding, well, just about everything except for any cute guys that Liv dated. Even then, Charlie thought it was only to show off to her mom how many beautiful men she could bag before breaking their hearts. Charlie never understood how Liv's parents could be so rigidly close-minded when they produced the most open-minded nerd to ever walk the streets of Oklahoma.

When Charlie's family got together, the Trips made it a point to make it a trip, and usually brought all the alcohol they could carry and drank every drop, all while laughing and sharing stories. The oldest with three younger brothers, who were all already married with children, Charlie had her pick of sister-in-law and aunt jokes she could throw at the family freely. She even smoked joints with her Mormon sister-in-law, Peggy, the only sibling that would smoke pot, though only on occasion.

The call and engine stopped simultaneously and as she dug for her purse, her glazed copper eyes snuck another

stare at the sweaty lawn boy. Liv pulled up in her white Chrysler Sebring. Liv knew the extent of the bird shit that covered her car grossed Charlie out and often caught her, as she did now, cringing at the dried pools of white and gray splattered across her vehicle. In an attempt to divert her attention, she hurried and hopped out of the car while Charlie snagged another look at the lawn boy,

Liv gave Charlie a hard time, "I see you creepin' over there."

"Mm. I can't help myself." Charlie said licking her lips, "Do you see his shoulders?"

She looked, "Sweaty." Liv opened the back door and reached in for Baby Alec.

"You think he's cuntlingual?" Charlie joked.

"I don't know. Ask him." Liv dared, "I bet he says yes."

Charlie thought for a minute while swinging her keys into her left thigh. She imagined the man setting her atop the air conditioning unit before she ripped off his clothes, exposing the Coppertone tan line above his almond ass cheeks. His ass was so juicy she wanted to swim in it.

Liv swung a diaper bag over her head and Baby Alec, now drooling on a safety pop, onto her hip. Although Charlie only came up to Liv's shoulders, she was a vivacity

intoxicating enough to make a whole room giddy. She had a smile that could emanate the cutest array of giggles, revealing dimples in her cheeks that only gods could have carefully placed. The dimples dented into their usual, devilish position as she thought of what she'd like him to do next.

Charlie drooly suggested, "You should invite him over tonight because we're having a party."

"What?" Liv asked surprisingly, "What's the occasion?"

"Vice night."

Liv raised an eyebrow, "I didn't know there was such a thing."

Charlie rolled her eyes, "Vice night can happen any night silly. Someone just has to call it." Charlie's phone beeped for a message and upon whipping it out, she turned to go inside. Liv followed her, passing the collection of yard animals and gnomes lining the sidewalk to the house. One drunken night, Charlie and Delaney decided it would be a great adventure to travel to the rich neighborhoods of Edmond and collect any cute yard creature they could find.

Charlie had been organizing Liv's surprise graduation party, along with Delaney and Merrick, for a month. Her phone had been ringing off the hook all day. Charlie believed that by playing the aloof card regarding the

party, which Liv would eventually find out about, she could control what Liv knew about its true purpose.

"Hey A.D.D.," Liv tapped the top of Charlie's head as though she was trying to get reception, "why am I inviting the lawn boy fantasy? Who all did you invite and why am I the last one to know?"

Charlie's feet stopped moving once she reached the door but her fingers never faltered in their swiping and thumping on the touchscreen. *BYOB, be here at seven. Say nothing to Liv.* Liv reached around her and unlocked the door, releasing the hounds.

"What are you saying?" Charlie as she texted, "I invited work people." Never looking up from her phone, Charlie walked into the living room, plopped onto the couch, dumped the shredded weed from the disco ball grinder and began rolling a blunt. The higher Liv was, the less Liv noticed. Delaney came in from the kitchen with a pack of sunflower seeds.

"I invited the lesbians we like and the rest of our friends." Delaney sat next to Charlie and shoved a fist full of seeds into her mouth. Since she had quit smoking cigarettes, she found relief in making her kisser raw from the salt intake. "What do you think if I made my next

graffiti target that stretch of cement under the I-44 Bridge at Pennsylvania Avenue?"

Charlie's head shot up in excitement, "It's gonna be badass and since it's the exit to the gay bars you shouldn't hold back." Charlie was a huge supporter of Delaney's art. Graffiti wasn't Delaney's only talent but had developed so quickly, their garage was now covered in it.

Charlie remembered watching Delaney viciously paint a rectangular canvas after she broke up with the psychotic Scorpio, Regina. She sat, eating chips, and watched as Delaney swept red acrylic around a woman's curved silhouette, "Are you using red because you're angry?"

Delaney paused for a moment and stared into the penciled tits, "Yep."

Charlie was just about to comment on how much she loved the woman's body when Delaney took to spray paint, throwing a black line of censor over the woman's eyes, tits, and snatch. She exclaimed, "What the fuck did you do that for? She was perfect!"

"Exactly." Delaney had begun to allow black ink to drip from the edges of black spray paint, each time tilting the canvas woman backwards or forwards until she got the effect she wanted. The painting hung in the foyer along

with Charlie's whip, which she'd placed carefully atop the canvas.

Delaney had stopped pursuing a college education and focused on her artwork incessantly. With the garage complete, Delaney took up slipping out at night to tackle the colossal slabs of blank cement. Charlie often went with Delaney; mainly to keep a lookout but also because she was so amazed at how quickly Del worked. She watched Liv bounce on the balls of her feet and look at her watch, "I promised Merrick I'd go to her graduation so I'm gonna hop in the shower."

"You put the night together yet," Delaney asked, "was it good?"

Liv groaned, "Yeah, I gave out my number though."

"To how many dudes?" Charlie asked.

"Well," Liv paused, "two dudes and one chick."

Delaney spit seeds into her solo cup before allowing the excitement to sweep over her face, "Char, our girl met a girl! I'm no longer the only lesbian!"

Charlie was hardly surprised. She knew Liv was an animal that loved dick too much to end up with a girl. The two always talked about sex whether they were wasted, stoned, or sober, so Charlie thought she had a pretty good hold on the depths of Liv's sexuality. She challenged the

idea, "How does that make sense? Her ratio is 2 to 1 with the dicks up and running."

"It's true," Liv laughed, "one of them already texted me today. But I must say, this is the first chick that makes me wanna get eyes deep in some peaches. She touched my lower back and I thought for a sec that it was a wonderfully tingling taser electrocuting me."

Charlie rolled her eyes; Liv always started her infatuations with extreme declarations of intuitive feelings. "You better go cool that electricity down." She chortled, "You don't want to graduate twice in a day."

Delaney shoved Charlie into the couch pillows and grabbed her cell phone before turning to Liv, "What's her name? How'd you meet her? Is she on Facebook? Are you gonna go on a date?"

Liv checked her watch and began stripping off clothes hurriedly while checking off responses with her fingers, "Jackson, she's Merrick's nutrition friend who's also graduating today. Yep, she already added me. And no idea but she was very impressed when I told her I owned a Les Paul."

Del wasn't surprised, "Duh, cause your fingers are nimbly bimbly from jammin'." She gasped, "She's already added me!"

"Well that's great Olivia, you found a creep show. I wonder if she added me too..." Charlie immediately snatched her phone from the coffee table to check. She thought she needed to find out lawn guy's name so she could check him out on Facebook and maybe find a hot picture of his six-pack she could save for rainy days. She couldn't log on fast enough.

"That's pretty hasty." Liv said sounding a little freaked, "To be fair, Delaney is in my profile pic, she screams lesbian, and I did tell her you were my best friend."

Delaney cackled into the screen on her phone, "You're right. It's totally a lesbian thing to do."

Charlie's profile popped up, "Nope. She didn't add me! Did you forget to tell her about your *other* best friend? Wait, when is Micah gonna be here to get Baby A?" Charlie lobbed her phone on the couch and went back to pinching the weed onto the wrap and began rolling the wrap's edge into itself.

Liv knew, "Micah should be getting off at three so she'll probably pick up Alec around then. When are people supposed to show up?"

"Eight." Charlie licked the length of the cigarillo to seal the brown paper, pressing it closed with her freckled

bottom lip. It had taken Charlie two months to learn how to roll perfect joints but blunts were something she was born to roll and felt accomplished every time she lit one of her own creations.

"Damn it, Charlie, you told me seven." Delaney snatched the blunt from Charlie and ignited the stick.

Charlie gave Delaney a warning look, "Well, you better tell all those people eight!"

"Jesus Christ." Delaney was exasperated, "Fine."

Delaney flipped out her ancient slider phone that had seen more action than a war vet. Charlie had witnessed it being flushed down the toilet three times, dropped in two glasses of Jack and Sprite, and purposefully ran over by Delaney just to see if she could kill the indestructible cell but to her disappointment, it proved to be truly immortal.

Charlie received a text from Quinn Grigsby, Liv's mother, saying that they were on their way from Ardmore, two hours away. Charlie checked her watch; Liv was just now getting in the shower. Charlie asked her, "Liv, why aren't you walking again?"

Liv sighed, "Because it's too much money and my degree is a laughable excuse for a ceremony."

Charlie hated that Liv didn't see the value of her accomplishment. "I still don't get how you can spend all those hours of reading and writing and still call it laughable."

Liv ruptured, "Society tells us education is essential and vital in order to succeed in the quote "modern world" but I could have had the same outcome from a coke addiction and a library card and still would have saved money."

Delaney, who had been holding in a cloud of smoke this whole time, finally exhaled, pointing to Liv, "Hey, shaky Shakespeare has a point."

Liv checked her watch, "I gotta get goin'. Fill ya in about Jackson later."

As Liv disappeared into the bathroom, Charlie began to overflow with angst and punched Delaney in the arm. "Did you forget we were surprising her? What the hell?"

Delaney pinched Charlie's tit, "Fuck off! I forgot. I didn't text anybody so don't worry, I just pulled it out so it looked I was."

"Thank God." Charlie said with relief, "I swear I thought she'd put it together."

Delaney grumbled, "I still can't believe she's not walking. Momma Grigsby is pissed about it."

Charlie and Delaney had met before either of them knew Olivia, before Charlie had married and divorced, and before anyone had worked at Pops, at a "Labor your Neighbor Day." It was a white trash party where the two both showed up in thrift store Sturgis tees, each with some sort of American flag flare. After sharing a blunt, the two never looked back.

Both women had decided to hold off on their college education shortly after a stumbling start of failures due to excessive absences. After this, they changed their focus to inebriation and watched each other go through Xanax bars, handles of Jameson, and had finally managed to reach moderation in all and every vice but coffee, pot, and cigarettes. This they concurred to be the essential three.

"Well," Charlie pointed out, "wouldn't you be pissed if your daughter made the president's honor roll all through grad school and still didn't walk?"

"True, but I wouldn't want to walk either." Delaney said wearily, "It's a waste of money."

Charlie cringed when Delaney always copped out of an experience or helpful purpose with her cheapskate excuses.

Delaney and her younger brother were raised on their mother's social work checks alone. Watching her struggle caused Charlie to be all the more thankful for her

comfortable childhood in Oklahoma City with her three brothers, under the care of her own parents, who owned an architecture company?

"Well," Delaney said, "we gotta hurry and de-pothead the house before she gets here at six."

"Yeah," replied Delaney, "the last thing we need is her coming in to find Livvy Jean's dealing pot to support herself on the day of her graduation party."

"Agreed." Charlie chided, "The Grigsbys would have her head."

Delaney giggled, "She'd just grow another one."

Considering the idea of Liv growing replacement heads, Charlie decided it was plausible. Liv was headstrong and resilient enough to survive decapitation in Charlie's imagination. The thought of all that head spawning, for some reason, made Charlie, now so stoned her eyes were barely visible through the slits of her eyelids, thirstier than a mosquito in a room of vampires. Once she traveled into the kitchen to realize the house was out of vodka, she snatched her keys and purse and drove the bumping red Mustang to the liquor store.

She had opened the liquor store door off Kelly Avenue when she noticed the yellow fat cat silhouette warning sign: Caution. PHAT PUSSY PATROL. Charlie stuck to browsing

the whiskey on the side of the wall; since she was terribly allergic to cats she hoped to avoid bursting in red rashes that emit heat greater than a Clydesdale's undercarriage. She stared at the whiskey wall, only wanting Seagram's, but the Canadian blend was nowhere to be found. *You're just high*, she thought, *Look harder*.

Charlie removed her sunglasses and continued the search for Seagram's while eavesdropping on the liquor lady's story she was sharing with a middle aged woman.

"The other day I had five guys come in, all reeking' of marijuana. Their eyes were more fired up than my terrier's red rocket. None of them seemed to care that I knew!"

The liquor lady turned her focus onto Charlie, who was chuckling across the store, "See, she even thinks it's ridiculous. I'm tellin' her this story because her husband's a cop. You need help darlin'?"

"No, I'm still deciding, thank you though!" Charlie tried not to make eye contact. The word cop shot her into paranoia.

Goodnight, what do I smell like?! I bet my eyes are bloodier than my tampon. Seagram's. Find the Seagram's. She continued to search, following each shelf to the end. Nothing. She decided to risk the cat and turned towards the

vodka when the liquor lady was right in front of her face holding, what Charlie assumed, was the phat pussy patrol.

"Honey, what are you tryin' to find?" She rubbed the cat's calico foopa, which Charlie swore was hiding another cat underneath. The clerk squinted over her bifocals at our girl.

"I'm just looking for Seagram's." Charlie replied, "Looks like you're out."

The lady stared at Charlie frozen as though she herself had lost her mind. After a pause, she slowly reached to the shelf directly in front of Charlie's face and grabbed a bottle of Seagram's. There were four different options and sizes directly in front of her. Speechless, Charlie could only stare at the bottle, open mouthed, as though it had betrayed her in a time of urgency. The only thing to break their silence was the clink of the bottle against Charlie's gold ring. This was followed by Hadley's ringtone, Infinity Guitars by Sleigh Bells, the wail of which startled both women, causing the cat to dart into Charlie on its way down, and for Charlie to drop Seagram's bottle to its explosive end on the liquor store floor.

"I'm--I am so sorry. Please--" Charlie could barely complete a phrase. She wanted to run.

"Paul!" The liquor lady shouted, "Get out here and mop up this whiskey! Kitty's havin' a fit and I don't want her to lap this liquor up!"

Charlie ignored the phone call and began picking up the bottle shards spread out across the tile floor.

"Honey, don't do that. The last thing I need is a customer bleedin' out over a jug of whiskey."

"Well, let me pay you for it and get out of your hair. I don't want to risk another bottle--," Charlie's phone blasted a second time and she, again, silenced it.

"Uh, yeah you'd better do that darlin'." The two made their way to the cash register and after 5 swipes, Charlie's card had been declined five times. She gave the woman the \$7.53 she managed to dig out of her purse and was set free by the liquor lady, who kept a bitter stank face locked onto Charlie until she was completely out of the store.

As Charlie sank into her driver seat, her phone went off yet again, but this time it was an unknown number, which she answers, "Hello! Can I help you?"

A firm middle-aged man's voice replied, "This is Officer Greensborough. Is this Charlie Trip?"

"Yes, what's this about?"

"There's been an accident. Chigger Sitters has caught on fire."

Charlie became stiff and gripped the door handle until her knuckles were white, "Is anyone hurt?"

"No ma'am." The cop replied, "But the damage is extensive. We need you to come immediately."

"Of course. I'm on my way." Charlie hung up and zoned out. Thoughts stampeded through her head, *What the fuck kind of shit storm is this? We didn't even cook today, it can't be the ovens. Maybe a gas fire? Why didn't I think to ask? I need a shot. I need a bowl.* After a long breath, she erupted in a yell that could be heard outside of the car and in the liquor store, making Paul jerk up from cleaning the whiskey puddle.

3

As far as Liv Grigsby was concerned, Quinn and Rob Grigsby had to be handled with care; for her own safety and sanity. Though as far as Delaney Marks was concerned, the Grigsbys were a science project ready to be tested, dissected, and inspected freely. The Grigsbys believed in introducing the inviolable sanctity of traditional values as the way of life to their children, while flip flopping between churches and denominations every six months. Delaney's mother, Tina Marks, the only parent she had, never brought religion up, since she saw it as a form of control and stressed the importance of openness and honesty within the family, no matter the subject.

The thought of being raised under the Grigsby household was a completely foreign concept to Delaney. Liv wasn't allowed to listen to the radio until she was thirteen and couldn't drive or date until she was eighteen. Movies had to be viewed by her parents first to make sure they were free of any explicitness that may cause their daughter to feed her wild side.

What they didn't monitor were the copious amounts of books she brought home from the library and spent all night

reading, nor did they think she would find the one corner of her bedroom where she could duct tape her radio to the wall and get The Edge, Dallas/Fort Worth's Rock Alternative station, and jam out to Rage, Weezer, and Korn to her heart's content.

Delaney started everything early: drinking at twelve, smoking cigarettes at fourteen, and pot at fifteen. Raised in the southeast Oklahoma town, Duncan, she had easy access to the Homeland next door, the smoke shop down the street, and the public pool was no more than a block away. MTV was her salvation from the small town's humdrum activities, consisting of the Duncan Demons Homecoming Parade and the annual World's Largest Garage Sale. She took up soccer and played for the Lady Demons; it proved to aid her in providing an outlet for her teenage angst as well as provide her with her first girlfriend, a striker with ebony hair and eyes to match against dark caramel skin. She realized she was into women the moment she laid eyes on Left Eye Lopes in TLC's video for "Ain't 2 Proud 2 Beg."

Her current love interest was a one, Molly Blathem, whom she'd met online, and lived in Montana. She was a graphic designer who cross-dressed in tuxedos weekly, singing and whipping her short fauxhawk black hair back and forth into the microphone to the extent of nausea at times.

In her free time, she enjoyed smoking pot, painting her nails, and watching marathons of Glee, Vampire Diaries, and any other God-awful dinnertime teenage drama. After a few months of Skyping and texting, Delaney flew up to the beautiful state of Montana in April and, in a whisked whirl of twitter pated blindness, invited Molly to visit Oklahoma that summer. This, she kept from her roommates.

Delaney often thought of how much more grounded and responsible she was in comparison to Olivia. Liv would overdraw her bank account around three times a year, usually paid rent late, and procrastinated everything. Delaney didn't even have a bank account, always paid in cash, and was always five minutes early. The extremities of their upbringing had resulted in juxtaposed responsibility. While she knew that she had heard Liv acknowledge her lack of self-discipline, which Del assumed came from the deprivation of teenage exploration, she never showed any desire to change or make life simpler.

Once, Liv told Delaney of how Rob and Quinn always withheld the majority of information that contrived who they were entering parenthood and how it left her feeling she only had bread crumbs compared to the amount of time that led up to their twenties. What ate at Delaney most about the secrecy was that no matter the table topic, Liv's

parents and grandparents repeated the same ten stories every holiday, birthday, and graduation that Delaney had attended; nothing further.

Delaney knew that she, herself, was an accident, that her mother was once addicted to coke, and that her father, they had never married, hadn't appeared since her second birthday. Tina was ecstatic when she wanted to be Ace Frehley for her first grade Halloween party and had embraced Delaney with joyful tears when she told her mother she was gay three years prior. Tina's only concern was how her daughter would be treated, especially in the close-minded state of Oklahoma. Regardless, she supports Delaney completely, though not financially, and still attends the Oklahoma City Pride festival every spring.

What Delaney managed to compile about Liv's parents was that Rob Grigsby was raised under the Kentucky Baptist roofs of neighbors and when he wasn't playing football he caused enough mischief to be sent to military school at an early age. Quinn Grigsby, formerly Chaney, was a Pentecostal homecoming queen who loved the arts and was planning to join the Peace Corps until she met Rob attending Oral Roberts University.

One night after a fight, Rob proposed to Quinn over a bottle of orange juice in the parking lot of a 7-11 and the

two left their degrees unfinished to focus on building their family. While they were very kind and motivated folks that worked hard for the well-being of the Grigsby clan, Delaney felt as though she could make a wrong move immutable as ink. Thus, she tried to make as many errors as possible in order to lower the Grigsby's expectations of her.

At 5:45 p.m. the Grigsbys pulled up to the house on Robin Hill. Liv's three siblings, Regan, Ben, and Finley, piled out and began grabbing paper bags loaded with cookout essentials. The youngest, Finley, was a teeny teen with straight cocoa hair that glazed like melted chocolate as it swept the top of her fair shoulders. She ran to the front door and busted in, yelling, "We are here! Hide the kiddie porn and other suggestivities!" Finley had a tendency to make up her own words.

Delaney hollered sensually, "But we're about to climax simultaneously!"

Finley's round silver dollar eyes were shining with elation as she ran to Delaney, who took the bags from the pint sized carbon copy of Liv and gave her a big squeeze.

"Did they let you drive up here?" Delaney asked.

"Are you kidding?" Finley quipped, "Mom and Dad won't let me anywhere near the highway."

A booming voice that had overheard the conversation added, "And let a sixteen year old endanger the entire state while blaring that Biebs kid? Yeah, right." Rob Grigsby's smirk widened as he entered the room and winced when Finley jabbed him in his middle-aged gut, erasing the naturally rigid expression that dressed his handsome features. His freshly shaved head shone in the light pouring in through the kitchen window.

"You'll have to risk it eventually!" Finley exclaimed.

Rob clamped his brawny farm hand on the back of Finley's neck. "You just hold your horses," He released his youngest offspring and turned with arms extended, "Hello, Del! Did you hear about this girl sending a boy to his knees?"

Delaney was alarmed, "What do you mean?!"

Finley glared, "This guy wouldn't leave me alone, he wouldn't stop hugging me. So I punched him in the throat."

Delaney scoffed and shook her head. She already knew what had led to the violent outburst. Two days prior, Liv, an incessant feminist, had found an online article about the confrontations thrust upon women by higher up male figures and the happy expectations men often have for the outcomes. Liv made everyone read it and had mentioned she was going to send it to Finley to help prepare her for what

was to come. Delaney knew Liv was using the article as a way to make a connection with Finley, but Liv was often misunderstood. She winced as she asked, "Was the guy okay? Was there an incident?"

Before Rob could answer a short and speedy Quinn Grigsby shot into the kitchen and the conversation, "She doesn't even know because she turned around and walked away after hitting him. We haven't heard from any lawyers so I'm assuming he's fine. Finley, however, is now on a short leash." Like her daughter, Finley, Quinn was a pale twig with silver eyes and stick straight hair, bleached blonde to cover her gray. Her mouth was usually set to the side in a straight line of uneasiness.

"I couldn't help it." Finley asserted, "I had already told him twice to stop hugging me and then he came up from behind!"

Rob, Delaney, and Quinn exchanged looks.

"I'm sorry what?" Rob angrily asked.

"Not like that." Finley rushed to explain, "He hugged me from behind so I turned around and punched him in the apple."

Quinn rolled her eyes and began giving orders, "Finley, take the cooler outside. Rob you should probably

help with the grill. Del, do you have room in the fridge for some pickle jars and coconut cream pie?"

Quinn Grigsby never left mission mode; four kids and a farm will do that to you. She plopped a bag full of homegrown tomatoes, cucumbers, and squash on the counter and flipped her head upside down to ruffle the wheat blonde mop atop her head. Delaney felt as though she were staring at her best friend in twenty years, "We cleared out the fridge in the garage. Hey, Livvy does that."

"Does what?" Quinn inquired coldly.

"Dips her head under to fluff her hair like that." Delaney answered laughingly, "She always does it when she's anxious or before she walks into a place."

"Huh." Quinn didn't seem interested, "Well butter my butt and call me a biscuit. The kid *is* mine."

What the fuck does that mean, Delaney thought as Quinn passed her for the spare fridge in the garage. Delaney hollered after her, "I'd hope you'd know she was yours. She did come outta your vagina after all."

Quinn snapped her head back to Delaney, as she stepped into the garage, and curtly replied, "Yes, well, she's a strange one. Bless her heart."

Quinn had just shut the door behind her when Ben and Regan, Liv's other siblings, hauled in a giant box of

graduation cap cookies and plopped them on the kitchen table. Regan already had one stuffed in her coral painted mouth.

Ben was already going off about some story but interrupted himself as soon as he saw Delaney, "Del, please tell me you have some cookies somewhere. The parentals have got us on the verge of going mental. By the way, we've got that load of *books* for Liv."

While Ben went on he thumbed the attention over to Regan, who was pretending to light up and smoke an imaginary pipe. At 23, the two were less than a year apart and shared the middle ground between Liv and Finley with the mindset that everyday held an opportunity to get frisky and find mischief. Regan looked as though she'd stepped right out of a Twiggy cloning machine with her short blonde hair, the funky plum tights that stretched out from underneath her short black overalls, and the gaudy jade jewelry she covered herself with. Her green eyes bugged out from her dramatic cookie cap stifled expressions.

Delaney grinned, "Put the *books* in Charlie's back closet for now and Charlie has a dugout in the tampon box under her bathroom sink. How many did you bring?"

"Five." Ben responded, "We weren't sure when we could get back up here so I threw in two more than usual." Ben

removed his black-rimmed sunglasses and eyeballed the photo-covered fridge, smoothing back the dark brown hair that jutted out over his forehead like an ungreased Daddy McFly, "It's some heavy reading." Together, Ben and Regan's appearance carried the definition of dapper yet their daredevil tendencies were always lurking behind their fiery green eyes.

Once, on a summer day, Liv, Regan, and Ben, decided to create a mountain of blankets and pillows that climbed the end of Ben's bed, next to a window. Using a blue Lego bucket, a tool that served useful in most of their adventures, they would rush to the bathtub and fill the bucket with water. Then as one of three leapt off the top of the pillow mound, the others would toss the water up at them, and all would roll down in giggles. This seemed to be the perfect plan until Quinn entered to see her children throwing water directly in front of the air conditioning unit and ended the game instantly.

Quinn came back through the garage door with a Dublin Dr. Pepper. As she searched the kitchen for a bottle opener, "Will you two quit gabbing and go get the rest of the haul from the car? You can hang out after we've got everything set up."

Delaney spotted Liv's jumbo black and white chameleon pipe, dubbed Beetlejuice, on top of the microwave, resting on an assortment of Kool-Aid packets and a mere side glance's reach from Quinn.

Fucker.

"Sure thing, Mom, but I've got to take a shit." Regan ran for the back of the house with her purse and brother bouncing behind her.

"Regan!" Quinn shouted angrily, getting onto her daughter, "Watch your mouth! And eat that cookie before you...Ben, I don't think she needs help?!"

"Quinn!" Delaney blurted delightfully, in an attempt to distract her, "Did you see the decorations Charlie's set up outside? The theme is bacon."

It was too late. Quinn's eyes were locked on Beetlejuice. She slowly turned, the suspense made Delaney's blood want to freeze. Quinn bullied, "What's a pipe doing in the kitchen Delaney."

Delaney had no choice but to stand up for herself. "I like to smoke pot while I make breakfast."

Quinn got in Delaney's face, "I don't want this shit around my kid and she better not be joining you for breakfast."

Delaney turned rigid, "She's a grown ass woman and she can join me for breakfast whenever she likes."

Quinn popped the top to the soda and grumbled, "I should've known you'd have an influence on her."

Delaney blew up, "Your daughter has been one of the best influences on me I've ever had. She's a kind, respectful, and fucking hilarious person that you won't even take the time to get to know. She busts her ass in school and you haven't read a damn thing she's written."

"No sugar, I haven't." Quinn stated. "That's as far as you're gonna get on that. I'm fixin' to bust open myself so I'm gonna use your bathroom."

"Go right ahead, I told them to go back to Charlie's room since they had to shit. So, yeah front bath's all yours."

Quinn darted a fiery-eyed warning, her reaction to any four-letter word, and started for the bathroom, "Do you know your garage is covered in graffiti and littered with cans?"

"Yeah, that's what I do these days." Delaney could feel the anger heating up underneath her blue eyes and tried to stay calm; tangoing with Quinn Grigsby was something you tried to avoid.

"Well, you do what you will. Hide that pipe from my kids. You should at least recycle those cans."

As soon as she turned, Delaney leapt for the pipe and slid it in the out-of-reach cabinet crammed with a copious amount of As Seen On TV gimmicks Charlie had hoarded over the years and the roommates had packed away.

"Fucking Liv."

Delaney began skimming the house for other inappropriate items. She found Charlie's naked man playing cards, a stack of poems Liv wrote: some about sex, others about drugs alongside an ode to a pickle in a pouch, and her own four foot bong, Chin Lao, poorly hidden behind the corner table.

As she glanced at the clock, she realized Charlie had been gone for two hours and was only supposed to be running to the liquor store down the street. Delaney had a Skype date with her long-distance online Montanan girlfriend, Molly, scheduled just before the party began. She wondered how much longer she would have to converse and appease Quinn before Charlie could take over.

Delaney thought Charlie handled the Grigsby's better than anybody. She didn't have a filter in the first place, nor cared if Quinn and Rob hated her. She was who she was, "Accept me or suck it," was how she had put it one night to

a wormy bartender that didn't like her sass; which resulted in the group getting kicked out by an old man bouncer who wore glitter suspenders.

Liv, on the other hand, would get mouthy with strangers, but when it came to her parents she slaved over protecting their image of her, forging it into the immaculate phantasm that she hid behind for twenty-eight years. Delaney felt sorry for Olivia since she could call up her own mother and tell her about a mushroom trip she'd had the night before and her mother never once showed an ounce of self-righteousness. She was shaking her head when Quinn returned, "Your Cadillac's and Dinosaurs paraphernalia add an interesting touch to the bathroom."

"Thanks, we like the comics quite a bit." Delaney decided to try to be friendly, "Had you heard of it?"

Quinn had begun inspecting the entertainment center, swiping her finger along the dusty top and blowing it off before rubbing it into her jeans, "No, dear, I don't read junk. Where are Ben and Regan?"

Quinn had started for the back bathroom, which was in Charlie's bedroom, when the heat rushed back behind Delaney's eyes and she panicked, "Oh they went back out to the car."

Quinn changed her direction toward the front door and

Delaney was already halfway down the hall by the time the screen door slammed shut.

She found the two smoking pot and playing leapfrog with Charlie's giant stuffed mushroom. Delaney hastily rattled off, "You two gotta run out the back and pretend like you've been chatting it up with Rob and Fin. I just sent Quinn out front looking for you."

The two bolted without a word, shoving the dugout into Delaney's hands as they passed her. It amazed Del how all of the Grigsby children had the same hang-up regarding Quinn's knowledge of who they really were to the point of risking worst-case scenarios constantly and how neither Quinn, nor Rob, had ever caught onto to the trouble their children got into.

Ben, Regan, and Liv had been working for a couple of years on their own pot garden. The Grigsby farm resided on 90 acres in the middle of nowhere southern Oklahoma, twenty minutes out from Ardmore. The three siblings had wandered the land most of their lives and had decided they would use a small clearing in the thick of the south east forest to plant their own pot field.

Olivia had been selling pot for the past five years and had been fortunate to never get caught. Her success selling other people's marijuana had enticed Regan and Ben

into partnering with Liv. All three children could grow copious amounts of any vegetable. Their built in knowledge of upkeep, irrigation, and timing from working on the farm was incredible and so, why not grow their own marijuana and make 100% of the profit? Delaney, who filled the position of Liv's drug accountant, had thought the idea was terrible until Liv brought her out on a camping trip, and showed her the extent they had taken in perfecting their pot plan.

After two years of experimenting in cultivation, Delaney was allowed to wander through the small field of pot plants that towered over her like corn yet felt like velvet and smelled like road kill skunk. It was heavenly. The siblings agreed they couldn't sell locally but that Liv would make the money selling to the customers she'd already gained in the city and claim to get it elsewhere. It took Delaney a few months to ease her mind of the scheme but after smoking the red dirt reefer and being couch locked for five hours, she was convinced.

Delaney heard her phone ring and snatched it up, seeing that it was Charlie, "Dude, did you get lost?"

Charlie's voice was shaky, "I think I may have lost my mind, but I definitely lost the day care. There was a fire."

"What?!", Delaney almost dropped the phone, "What happened? Are you okay?"

Charlie took a moment before she vomited the details, "I'm fine, and no one was here. They think it was arson. There was a lot of cooking oil in the oven with matches and they think that's what started it all. What am I going to do? I've been cheated?! Who gives that much of a fuck? I don't have a business. Literally, everything is gone. The TVs, computers, the toys, and the stash of pot I kept under the cookies in the cookie jar, the TVs, the entire kitchen. The fucking TVs. What am I going to do?"

"What about insurance?" Delaney inquired, "Where was Hadley?"

Charlie sighed, "Insurance doesn't cover shit until the arson is cleared up. Hadley was with her new boyfriend I guess. I told her she could bring him tonight. His name is Ricky. I'm on my way home now. There's nothing more I can do today except wallow in my own sad puddle of melancholy. Fix me a drink. Make it a quadruple and throw some Rohypnol in it if you've got it."

"Yeah, you're lucky I refilled my prescription, Charlie." Delaney rolled her eyes and rapped her knuckles on the coffee table. Charlie had enemies but they were the pansy frenemies you hid behind your hair from when it came

to random bar encounters and town events. The kind of enemies you play fake nice with in the grocery stores and exclaim put downs through big tooth smiles, "You still look like you're in high school!" Who really wants to hear that? Nobody. Nobody wants to hear that fake bullshit.

"Hurry up." Delaney demanded, "Maybe you'll distract Quinn from her usual undercuts with your self-pity." A thought of hope hit her, "You know...you could look at this as an opportunity?"

Delaney could hear Charlie slurp a drink through the phone before responding, "How is that?"

"I mean, you've been pretty disappointed that childcare wasn't all you hoped it would be. Maybe now you can figure out what would suffice?"

Charlie's turn signal was ticking in the background, "Yeah. That's true. Thanks for that. See ya soon unless some other shit happens."

A few hours later, Merrick stood outside of Hamilton Field House, waiting to be led into the gymnasium along with all the other capped and gowned graduates. She had texted Liv several times and only got back, *I'm outside*. Merrick finally spotted Liv leaning against a vent, flapping what looked like an envelope between her palm and thigh and staring at the immense and rear backed bronze bronco statue.

She and Liv had always hated that their school spelt bronco, bronCHo, and was reminiscing about the drunken tequila night when Liv, a sophomore resident assistant, talked the Christie's Toy Box clerk, Doug, into letting her have the four foot black display dick while Merrick was fingering every pocket pussy in the joint.

The next morning, the campus hit headline news when their bronze mascot, Buddy, had greeted the world anatomically corrected with a four foot chocolate morning member gorilla glued on with two black ping pong balls completing the set. Television news tickers ran things like *Mascot Mounting*, or *Buddy Gets a Chubby* at the bottom of basic cable screens. It was an unsolved mystery and since

Doug never ratted them out, Liv and Merrick had a black penis cake delivered to his work with a card that read:

Thanks for not bustin' my balls. -Buddy

Merrick watched her friend light a cigarette and started to run up to her when the procession began and she was forced to walk. The music had started and she was able to keep her eyes on Liv long enough to see that Liv could hear the music and was not going inside. *What a bloody hatchet wound*, she thought as she seethed.

By the time she walked onto the blue and yellow painted wood court, Pomp and Circumstance had her wishing she had chosen to skip graduation as well. She ticked her head left and right like a pendulum to the beat. She spotted her redheaded parents, Emily and Bruce, proudly smiling, and became overwhelmed with joy, to the point of goose bumps and was satisfied with her choice by the time she took her seat. She thought gleefully, *Damn right I accomplish shit. Suck it world.*

It only took forty-six minutes of encouraging rhetoric before Merrick Lillian Jessup's name was heard over the speakers and she ascended the ramp to the stage. Her brand new satin red heels clacked with every step and as she reached the top, Bruce Jessup set off an air horn. It startled even the professional name pronouncer, who had

removed his mic from the podium stand because it gave him a sense of being an announcer, which was his dream ever since he saw Space Jam. The air horn had thrown him and caused him to drop his microphone. He would never remove a mic from its podium again.

The mic rolled towards Merrick, who went to pick up the mic, her clacking heels getting louder and louder as she approached through the high pitch squeals emitting from the speakers. Hands clapped over ears, gasps and moans erupted throughout the gymnasium. Thankfully, Merrick was quick in her mission and soon the mic was back on the podium and the empty blue stock diploma holder was in her hands. This caused the entire gym to overflow with cheers, whistles, yeehaws, and applause filling Merrick with both embarrassment and bliss.

She'd received six high fives just making her way back to her black metal folding chair and was all smiles until she spotted her parents again, waving, and realized that Olivia had never come in; she'd missed the entire thing. Merrick immediately swyped a message to Liv: *I was just a badass and you missed it. Way to be a Lame Jane.* Her mother had caught it on video and while she was impatient to watch the hang-up and would probably watch it over and over again, she would never let Olivia see it.

Merrick watched the rest of the graduates make their way across the stage and was forced into a reflective, yet future conscious state, *I've got to get that internship. I've got to get out of Oklahoma.* A text jarred her from these thoughts, hoping it was Liv, but instead it was Tommy Pickens, her neighbor: *Hey babe, congratulations! Hope you're having a great day! I got something for you to sit on for graduation!* The text was accompanied by the always unwanted dick pic.

Tommy was thirty-two, worked as a carpenter, and drank Blue Moon just as often as she liked to, which was constantly. They enjoyed the same shows on Netflix and getting naked together. As far as Merrick was concerned, Tommy was it, he was the one. So why hadn't she introduced him or even mentioned him to her friends? Because all she'd wanted to do was leave Oklahoma since she moved from New Mexico when she was seven. Based on what Merrick knew, Tommy was secure, settled, and sexy, and that would be reason to stay in Oklahoma. Tommy didn't know she was desperate to leave either.

They stood to toss their caps and while Merrick flung hers as high as it would go, she was disheartened to see that her cap was the one flying that far, the rest had been lazily tossed in an attempt to catch their own, or at least

be able to find it. *Pathetic. We've just graduated and they're still concerned with their belongings to the point of these stupid cardboard hats and they're all fucking identical.*

As Merrick busted out of the blue metal double doors, she was already calling Liv, "Where the hell are you?! I didn't see you!"

"Well, Merrick Lillian Jessup." Liv began, "I am already outside so get your snobby, graduated ass out here!"

It wasn't hard to spot Merrick's glossy red hair as she weaved through the crowd of black and blue caps and gowns. After another phone call and some over the top hand waving, Merrick spotted Liv and began running. Her gown was unzipped and flowing like a cape in the wind. Underneath, she was wearing a silk bandana shaped dress that came up high on the sides with oriental print. As soon as Merrick reached Liv, the wind changed and blew her dress up into her face, unveiling not underwear, but a fiery red gingtastic vagina.

"It's the fiery red bush! Why doesn't it burn up?!" Liv pulled the dress down. "Why aren't you wearing underwear, the dress is short as it is?!"

"Holy shit, Liv!" Merrick shouted in shock, "I just beaved families and children! It felt so good to just be naked under this since it's so silky!"

"So that's a fire's weakness?" Liv asked, "Silk?! I always thought you'd be Aaron, not the bush, when we play Exodus."

"Why do you get to be Moses?" Merrick said, disappointed.

"My vagina is named after epics remember?" Liv winked at her and danced a dramatic spin in front of her friend.

Luckily for her, Merrick's parents, Bruce and Emily, had fallen back far enough that her father hadn't seen the public flash since he was looking around campus. Bruce Jessup was a dedicated rancher who never got to visit Merrick very often and was distracted by his simultaneous efforts to observe the campus and maneuver through the crowd. But Emily Jessup saw the whole thing and had folded over into a laughter that made her face redder than her own hair.

"All I saw were your white ass cheeks and Olivia's face!" Emily screeched out as she tried to catch her breath, "Hi Livvy Jean! I was disappointed we didn't get to see you walk."

Olivia fidgeted with the envelope, "Oh, you know how fidgety I get sitting in those things."

Emily waved her hand at Liv, "Oh yes, sugar, I remember Sunday mornings how Quinn would get so frustrated with the ants in your pants. You were such a cutie pie though."

"Yeah," Merrick side-slugged her friend, "then she got smart, then she got an ass, and it all went downhill from there."

Merrick had met Liv in church and remembered sitting on the red worn pink pew, at age seven, with Olivia's Mawmaw while the band was playing. The church had such an outrageous and powerful sound system, she could feel the bass vibrations shaking her ribcage and Liv felt it too. When Liv asked Mawmaw what it was, she replied, "The Holy Spirit children!" Even at that age, she knew it had to do with the colossal black speakers and both had anticipated a logical answer from Mawmaw.

She watched Liv stare at her shoes for a moment and knew she was recalling past church memories. Liv's past was religion. It had been spoon-fed to her three times a day, seven days a week, and more on Sundays. Merrick's past was religion on a lackadaisical basis. You went when you weren't hung over and prayed before meals if you remembered

to do so, but you always remembered when grandparents were visiting. Liv raised her eyes back to Emily, "Yep, Mom and Dad are still tryin' to figure it out and blame someone for where the ass got its smarts from. I'm thinking it's a reactive hybrid of sorts."

A roaring voice threw questions above their heads, "Where are Rob and Quinn? What do you plan to do with your masters, kid?" Bruce was such a monumental size of a farm man even Liv, who stood around 5'7", had to look up to talk to him. Olivia had always joked to Merrick that she'd half expected and hoped to wake up one day to Merrick's final growth spurt. In Liv's fantasy, Merrick would stand as gargantuan as her father and be able to give her constant piggyback rides from the bars.

"Back in Ardmore," Olivia said, looking up to the redheaded man. "We're supposed to have a family dinner at some point but we're waiting to get everyone together. And it looks like I'm just going to be broke for now."

"That's understandable. You guys are pretty spread out," Bruce returned. "Isn't Regan living in Clovis?"

Liv's phone went off, but she ignored it and continued, "She is. We rarely get together unless it's the holidays."

Regan had followed her boyfriend to Clovis, NM after a nasty divorce ended her first marriage to a condescending unsupportive cock named Clinton. She now spent most of her time exploring New Mexico, perfecting her cooking skills, and learning French. Within two years, she and her boyfriend were going to move to Guernsey. Whenever Liv told anyone of Regan's long term plans, no one seemed to have heard of the island in the English Channel. Merrick had even Googled it to make sure it existed.

Something caught Olivia's attention and she rolled her eyes before abruptly spinning out of the conversation, and strutted her lanky gait towards a boy Merrick had seen before but couldn't place. Liv didn't look happy to see him as he smirked and said, "Can you sense my presence or something?"

Emily and Bruce were arguing about where they'd parked the car and with the surrounding people making things less noticeable and Liv's back to her, Merrick took a step towards Liv to close in on the conversation unseen.

She heard Olivia respond in her dry sarcastic voice, "It's the collective subconscious connecting us that lets me know you're coming."

The boy frowned at her, "Do you always have this all knowing pretentious bit going on?"

"No, sugar, 'tis a fact." Liv returned, "It's the same thing as when someone crosses your mind before they physically enter the room or give you a ring on the phone. Plus, I simply don't like you."

"You don't know me."

"Nor do you know me but you're the one claiming you know about a bit that I supposedly project." Liv passed something that looked like a granola bar over to the guy, he was wearing weird skele-toe shoes. *What is Liv doing with this guy? We make fun of that shit all the time. She's ended it for less!*

"Do you not? You seem to be a bitter bitch to the bone." Skele-toe guy quickly handed her a fistful of money, palm down. *She is not selling weed right now, at our graduation, well, my graduation, and four feet from my parents?! Merrick was fuming, she wanted to interrupt and end the exchange but knew better than to expose Liv on the job.*

"Don't bite the hand that sells you weed, moron." *I'm going to kill her.* Although Merrick was pissed off, the only reason anyone knew what the two were doing was because she had been watching them.

Bruce gave Merrick a playful shove, "Where ya wanna eat, kiddo?" Bruce had a red bush of a mustache that prickled and fluffed in all directions.

Merrick tried her best to pay full attention to both conversations. She replied, "We could go to my work? We're having a special on filet mignons and T-bones this week. The T-bones are bigger than your face."

Bruce's grin couldn't be wider, "I'm sold. You wanna ride with us?"

"No," Merrick strained to hear Liv's conversation but she couldn't concentrate, "I'll meet you there. I need to run home for a second." She winked at her mother, who giggled at the thought of her daughter's bleach white butt cheeks.

As her parents walked away, Merrick caught the guy's voice and was sucked back in.

"What's with the letter?" he asked.

"Peace Corps," Liv replied. "Haven't opened it."

Ricky snatched the envelope from Liv and looked at it.

"Peace Corps?" Merrick had to keep herself from gasping but couldn't stop her eyes from bugging out, or her cheeks from getting red. *Peace Corps?! Liv told me she didn't end up completing the application.*

She continued to wave her parents off while standing perfectly still in order to hear the rest, all the while pretending to be on her phone.

Liv playfully said, "Opening other people's mail is a crime."

He came back with, "So is drug dealing, but if you can sense people, you'll never get caught, right?"

Liv took the letter back, "Why are you bothering me, Ricky?" *Ricky, Ricky, who the fuck is Ricky?*

"You don't remember me, do you?"

"Of course, I remember you, Ricky." Liv said roughly, "When I was a junior, you snorted beer salt off my desk in Spanish. Doesn't mean I know you. Doesn't mean I'm your friend."

Oh shit, Merrick remembered Ricky. He was one of those troublemakers that are the only one who thinks what he does is funny, like pissing in a kid's Gatorade.

"We also had a writing class together when I was a freshman," Ricky added. "You wrote a poem about a pickle that fucked your insides up and you compared it to the Trojan horse." *Ha! That was awesome. Liv was literally on the toilet for hours after eating that.*

"Oh yeah," Liv said overzealously, "I didn't recognize you with all that douche you started wearing!"

Ricky rolled his eyes, "Figures, you might as well have had a marijuana cloud hovering over you, you were stoned every day."

"Every day for ten years now," Liv stated proudly.
Damn Skippy.

Liv suddenly remembered the Jessup and turned to glance over at them. Luckily, Merrick had her phone to her ear and pretended to be talking to her Aunt Louis, which she didn't have and hoped that Liv wouldn't notice. She didn't and turned back to Ricky when he asked, "So why the Peace Corps then?"

"I'm in a lot of debt. Creative writing degrees don't pan out for shit and you get priority in any interview process when you get back." Merrick could hear her flapping the envelope in her hands like she was doing before the ceremony.

"Is it *the* letter? And why weren't you inside? Didn't you graduate?" Ricky asked.

Merrick turned to watch them, but continued to swype up a storm. Liv stared at the envelope in her hands. She had taken the dental and medical exams, and hunted down reference letters from professors. Filling the application had taken up an entire day of sitting in a Starbucks last July. She remembered her venti iced coffee's sweat building

to the edge of the table and how she had let it fall in between her legs. She ripped the side open and let the letter fall into her hands. Liv offered the letter to Ricky, "The letter."

Merrick continued to be "on her phone," which proved to be helpful in avoiding several standard congratulation stories where it was always, "Congratulations! How are you? What are going to do now?" She had decided to adopt her imaginary Aunt Lois for life after she successfully half hugged about four people, all the while running through the same hushed, smiling apology, "Sorry, it's my Aunt Lois. Thanks so much! It's so good to see you!" She watched Ricky's eyes dart left and right as he read, his expression filling with shock as he read it. "Do you even know anything about Bulgaria?"

Liv was smoking a cigarette now and released five smoke rings, each varying immensely in size and density, "It's in between Romania and Greece, gets heavy snow, lotta reserves, they have jackals, and they just had a UFO sighting. What's it say?"

"You're in," He smiled. "It's Bulgaria or bust. You're supposed to let them know within seven days." Ricky floated the letter to Liv, who caught it with two fingers. He

turned back towards the field house entrance as she floated into her thoughts.

"Well, we're like that too Aunt Lou, I gotta go now though, they're waiting for me. Uh huh! Great talking to you too!" Merrick pretended to hang up and walked toward Liv, "Hey, girl, we're goin' to the city to grab some steaks and brewskies if you wanna come."

"Aw, man," Merrick could see the disappointment in her face, Livvy Jean loved steak, "there is a burger with my name on it waiting for me at home. Otherwise I would totally be down."

"Well, that sounds amazing too! We'll see ya soon, Livvy."

Merrick hugged her friend goodbye, "Bye dude, I'll call ya after and see if you're still out and about."

After the two friends parted ways, Merrick pulled her phone out and swyped a text message to Charlie:

Wildecunt in route.

The smell of charcoal grilled bratwurst, burgers, and chicken floated two blocks down from Robin Hill. Cars flooded both sides of the short street (if you blinked twice you'd miss the whole thing). A few stragglers were making their way to the house blaring Robin Thicke, where the Blurred Lines music video could be seen in the living room through the thicket of legs standing in front of the TV.

Charlie's phone went off as the group hoarding the view of the huge flat screen cheered to the arrival of summer.

"She's on her way!" Charlie shouted once she'd read the text message from Merrick, "Everyone head out back. Del and I will keep a lookout."

As the family and friends sputtered out onto the back patio, Del and Charlie stumbled over each other as they ran for the front door, snatching a backpack on the way. It wasn't until they had crossed the lawns of the next four houses, the halfway point of the road, that the two smokers were attacked by hack and hem bitch fits.

"Why?" Delaney panted, slowing to a halt.

"Why did we run?!" Charlie coughed out.

"You said it wouldn't--be that bad." Delaney wheezed as she blew her sentences out.

"I did---didn't know we--were sprinting." Charlie said as she lay down in the yard they stopped in. Delaney and Charlie didn't work out mainly because they walked for miles over forty hours a week. Charlie: by chasing kids in the day care. Delaney: by hustling food to tables at Pops. Running only happened when their lives were in jeopardy.

"Fuck you Char---bitch."

The two could hear a fiery tune of rooted blues spilling from Liv's car as she rolled nearer and looked to see her turn onto their street. Liv slowed to stop as she approached them, windows down between the two chokers, and turned down Alabama Shakes. She winked at Delaney, "What's it pay to get my gum chewed, blue eyes?"

"He," Charlie snorted. "She's calling you a hoo---ooker."

Delaney threw back, "Fuck you-Quinn is here."

"Wait. No way?" Liv clenched the steering wheel and checked her red eyes in the mirror; she'd smoked a bowl on the way home. Not only were they red, they were tiny slits she could barely keep open. The last thing she wanted was for her parents to find out she smoked pot, even though

she'd promised herself she would tell them after she got her masters. In her head it sounded good, but today would be that day and she was too financially involved to reveal the overlooked information.

"Yep." Charlie answered. "Whole--family."

"Why?" Liv was in utter panic. "I need a day's notice to psych myself up for this."

Delaney was still wheezing as she helped Charlie up from the lawn and said, "Surprise graduation party. Fin and Quinn's idea."

"Man," Olivia wrapped a curl around one of her fingers, "that's really nice. Well, thanks for the heavy dose of anxiety."

The two piled into the car as Livvy Jean slow jammed her forehead into the steering wheel. Delaney pulled a blunt from her pocket-t that read, Heavens NO HELL yeah, and lit it as she guided it to her friend. Liv scoffed to herself, "I'm already fucked so might as well continue."

Charlie held up a flask, ginger ale and a pack of cigs, "Yay for vice night? Don't worry, they're not staying."

Delaney added, "Pots put up."

"Good to know." Liv chiefed the stick for another moment before she passed it back to Delaney. She remembered

the green leather shoes that were on her feet. Her mother bought them for her, not realizing the leather marijuana leaves stitched to the top of the round toe. While snagging the liquids from Charlie she jerked the question, "You had to surprise me?"

"Well, surprise is better than shock I'd say." Charlie nabbed back the flask for her own swig of jack.

The smell of whiskey filled the car and Liv gruffed, "Shit. I'm going to smell like weed and whiskey now."

"Nonsense," Delaney lifted her torso to the windshield and dug into her back pockets to pull out cologne, Rohto eye drops, fruit snacks, and half of an orange Adderall, "Happy graduation friend."

"We're so proud!" Charlie beamed as she patted her friend's shoulder, "You're the first of the fuck ups to graduate and now the first to get a masters."

Liv whined, "I'm still going to be a fuck up if I don't get a real job."

Delaney shook her head as she chased whiskey with ginger ale, "You won't let that happen."

"It's true," Liv put out the blunt, "Let's go hang out with the Grigsbys."

Liv sat in the car strumming the steering wheel while Charlie and Delaney ran in to set up the surprise. She

joined Brittany Howard in singing, "Well, I got to get off this rock somehow," she shut the engine off, "and hopefully not slide into horse shit."

The empty house was eerily still and unnatural. Life appeared to be suspended and for a moment Liv thought the rapture might have truly happened and she was stuck in limbo. Then she opened the door to find the heavens rejected what was absorbed and Liv was greeted with a somewhat together, "Surprise!," followed by a shit storm of scattered salutations and hugs.

"Hi baby! Congratulations!" Quinn and Liv held their embrace for a breath. Olivia felt that her mother's grip was sturdier than usual, almost robotic.

"Thanks, Mom!" Liv replied. She was happy to see her family now that she laid eyes on them, "You look great!"

"Our little girl is a master now, Quinn." Rob pretended to sob as he took Liv into a head-locking squeeze of a hug. "You hungry? We've got a ton of food."

Liv nodded through the tight grip, "I could smell the backyard from the next street over and have been drooling ever since."

Rob released her, "Get in there, kiddo!"

Before Liv had a chance to start for the grill, her siblings overtook her with pushes and clasps of affection.

"Way to finish something respectable for once, Livvy Jean!" Regan knuckled rubbed Liv's head and hugged her sister before Ben came in for an elevated hug of sorts that spun Liv around a time or two before plopping her back on firm ground.

"We brought you some books." Ben smirked and Regan winked.

"I didn't see any books! Livvy, just wait until you see your cookies." Finley, who only reached Liv's shoulders, squeezed her sister as tight as she could.

Liv took a step back. It had been Christmas since she'd seen Finley, "Fin, look at you! How is it that you get an ass and tits at fifteen and Regan and I had to wait until we were out of high school?" Liv grinned wide at her younger sister.

"She's been going through boys like tissue paper." Regan playfully shoved Finley, who returned the warmth with a light slap to the arm. "I can't help it if I'm picky and they can't meet the standard."

"That's right, damn it." Liv shared a handshake with Finley that ended with finger guns blazing, "We've taught you well...Will you run and grab me a coke, love?"

"Absolutely." Before Finley disappeared to the house, Liv shot a fierce look of concern at her two siblings, "I

know books are a great cover up but that doesn't mean we need to use it to discuss business in front of everyone, specifically Finley."

Ben and Regan shared an annoyed glance Ben shouts, "Relax! She knows you smoke. You even told her about your short visit to--"

"Yeah I know!" Liv cut him off, "We need to wait on her. She has her sights set on OU med school and bringing babies into the world on more than a daily basis. The last thing we need to do is let her know what we got going on and influence her negatively." Olivia had always been protective of her siblings but usually guided them rather than thrown out stern demands and warnings. They would discover things anyways, and at least when things happened, her siblings felt they could go to someone in the family. She had no reason as to why she was so harsh that day, other than feeling overcome with wariness.

"All right. No worries." Ben had been flicking the side of his beer bottle the entire rant and had finally felt that he was allowed to take a swig.

"How many books did you bring?" Liv asked. The code word for weed came from books they had cut out and changed covers on every trip; in each book traveled oklahomegrown marijuana, wrapped like mummies in seran wrap.

Regan piped her answer, "Five, in case we don't see you for a while."

"Nice. Muchas gracias." A book was equivalent to a pound and they usually only brought two or three books up but she supposed with the parents they felt ballsier.

"For sure," Regan said.

Finley returned with the Coke can. Liv tapped the top of any can three times, every time before cracking it open.

"Why do you do that?" Fin asked Olivia.

"What?"

Finley pointed to the can, Liv was still tapping, "Flick the can like that?"

Olivia knew precisely which picnic bench she sat at on the field trip to the zoo, "In kindergarten, Jeff told me you have to tap it a few times to calm it down."

"Does it work?" Regan wondered.

"Always."

Regan smirked, "I think it's in your head."

Hadley Hill, an eavesdropping with-it, dawned dusk with her rippling blonde hair as she and her black maxi skirt swayed up to the sibling circle. She swung her arm around Liv and presented her with one of two shot glasses, brimmed of Seagram's, "Livvy Jean, you've been tapped plenty of times and no one's broke you yet."

Liv jetted out, "I'm a wild one!" as she turned to embrace her friend. She held her shot towards the Cimmerian summer sky and cheered, "Thank you, Hadley! Where are my folks?!"

She scouted the mass of people scattered in her backyard. The mix of friends included employees of Pops, classmates, and friends of the three roommates; all of which were rushing to the blue and red plastic coolers for a fresh drink to join in the celebratory toast.

When Liv finally spotted Rob and Quinn talking with Merrick's parents, she also found Merrick, who winked and laughed once she'd been caught by Liv and tapped the Grigsbys to guide their attention.

"I just wanna say thanks to everyone for coming over to celebrate. You guys are all my family, those that I've gone out and found and those that I was born stuck with." Liv gave Regan an elbow jab, "Nah I'm kidding, seriously though I'm lucky to be raised and watched over by this lot of crackpots. I love you guys!"

As she shot the whiskey, she was elated to receive a raucous return full of plastic clinks, whoops and hollers of Iloveyou, getits, and congrats. She began to head toward a crowd of friends she hadn't said hello to yet when

Quinn swooped in, sweeping her into the house, slamming the French door behind them.

Quinn was already pacing in the living room when she started in, "Do you think it's funny to call your family crackpots?"

Liv seized a cookie from the sombrero pan that displayed them, followed by her mother, Liv replied, "Yes, I do, but I take it you don't?"

"Do you even know what you're going to do now?" Have you considered your mountain of student loan debt?" Quinn took a bite of her cookie and the tassel crushed and fell onto her white starched blouse.

Liv thought about trying to laugh it off but began taunting her mother instead. "Gee, Mom I thought the surprise party was a way to say you were proud of me."

"That's what the ceremony was for," Quinn sneered, "if you would have gone, this was so I could bring you back to reality."

Liv didn't want to consider how her mother came to feel this absurd amount of propriety. She felt that she lived in reality, unlike Quinn, who lived in a world where each day she could drink Starbucks, had time to read the paper front to back, and watch Netflix to her heart's

content. Liv asked her, "Because I'm not living here, in this moment, breathing it right now?"

"You no longer get to broaden your horizons like some wild and wide-eyed hippie."

Liv thought Quinn had been watching too many gung-ho, honorable, war movies. Had she earned nothing by gaining her education?

Liv's voice turned rigid as she bluntly said, "I think I get to be whatever the hell I damn please. That's what happens when you fly the coop and become a grown ass woman, isn't it?"

Quinn only belittled her back, "You call yourself grown when you haven't even had a child."

This caused Olivia to blow up on her mother. She threw her hands up in the air and paced the kitchen ranting, "Oh, is that what defines it for you? Is that what this is about? The fact that you're pissed because when you were twenty-eight you had a kid holdin' your hand, one sitting on your hip, and one cookin' in the oven and I have somehow detoured toward a suggestive lifestyle of freedom, full of options, that you seemed to miss?! You should've just said no, Mom."

SLAP.

Quinn's tiny red handprint singed through Liv's skin to the chomp taken inside her cheek from the impact. A surge of blood filled her mouth like drool and Liv grabbed a blue solo cup from the kitchen table and spit the red into it. Quinn could see the raging blue vein that always throbbed out of Liv's forehead like a jagged and uncentered lightning strike when she was fuming. Liv spit again.

"You feel better now?" Liv looked through the French doors and kitchen windows, which were left open because the weather was still cool. She realized that most of the party had overheard their argument and was rooted in a shock and still from the dispute, with the exception of Rob Grigsby, who was already headed in towards the door.

Liv turned her focus back to her mother, "I may not know what I'm doing with myself, but I'm sure as hell not going to be having kids just because that defines success for you. I've busted my ass to get this far in my education and that's enough for me tonight. Thanks for the surprise. Bets are I won't forget this one."

Quinn's mouth slowly cracked into a pain angled gape as Liv slung the French door open, her blood cup in hand and jaw clenched, and walked passed Rob. She passed her siblings, sitting together, the look of disinterest held in the middle of their faces, between their eyebrows, and

headed towards Charlie. She was standing at the middle of the back privacy fence watching Liv worriedly. "Are you okay?" Charlie asked.

"I'm gonna go for a walk." Olivia didn't know what she was at this point and didn't feel like talking about it, "Keep it going though."

"Are you sure, dude?" Delaney went to touch Liv's cheek but Liv caught her wrist in a firm instant.

"I'm sure," she said soothingly as she released Dell's hand, "I'll be back."

She turned to the three Grigsbys before turning into the house, "Until we meet again, I'll be in touch. Love ya." Three iloveyous followed her as she approached the French doors. Rob had just asked Quinn what it was about when Liv entered and shut the door.

Liv answered for her mother, "It's about my lack of a job, her concern for my financial security, and disapproval of my lifestyle. I'd appreciate it if we could talk about this when I come home next weekend."

"We came up here so you didn't have to do that," Rob had shared the same afro potential in Liv's hair and as he watched her appear solid and stoic, he noticed a trembling afterthought in the bounce of her curls when she talked. He rubbed his shaved head, "but you're always welcome."

Liv nodded, thankful for her father's understanding, "I need some time to clear my head and since you all have to get going soon anyway, I think we should just plan to figure it out then."

Liv grabbed her black satchel and headed for the front door. Quinn swung her head around after her, "There's a paper sack full of peaches from Grandma Nan's tree. She's praying for ya."

"Well, no need to worry then." Liv slammed the door leaving her parents and the party behind.

After fifteen minutes of walking, Liv had the railroad crossing on Thatcher in sight. She drew in the smell of manure, hay, and horse as she passed the two-acre lot in the middle of the neighborhood that used their backyard for a pony pasture. One whiff of a hay field could flit Liv back to her chores as a child. The Grigsbys would caw and crow before the rooster. They combed the garden for weeds and produce, checked the chicken coop for eggs and set traps for snakes with golf balls, or killed snakes hiding in the nests. If that was the case, one of them usually took care of a dead haw-eyed chicken or two by throwing their stiffing bodies in a rusted burn barrel.

Once, Liv spotted a water moccasin hiding in a stack of empty chicken feed bags. When Regan didn't believe her,

she tore the next feedbag down, exposing the snake surrounded by white chicken feathers. His head sprang up, fangs out, like a drac-in-the-box. When Rob Grigsby came to save the day, he let the snake coil around a rake and chased Liv with it before killing it with the hoe.

Liv stopped at the wood pole fence and watched lightning bugs flash between tree branches. The sound of crickets overpowered cars driving by a block away and when Liv looked to the sky she wished she were home so she could see the Milky Way; the raw comfort her favorite candy bar was named after.

The only other time Liv had ever been bitch slapped by her mother was in junior high when she was caught making out with the youth group ruffian right outside of the non-denomination church. Liv had it bad for Craig even though he was three years younger than she was. He got in fights often, smelled like baby powder and let words drip off his tongue. Like honey from a jar, they slowly built into a golden heap of a deliciously sweet smirk that made you melt inside and out. They had started to ditch Sunday school to go for walks and talked mostly about what religion meant or didn't mean while Craig smoked weed. When Quinn told Liv she couldn't see him anymore, she called her a jealous bitch and SLAP. That wasn't the end of that.

When Liv arrived back at home, the house was Grigsby family free and gushing with people carrying plastic cups with bacons strips printed on them. Some were licking Molly off their fingertips. Others were puffing on spliffs in a living room circle. A couple was having it out in the hall, and girls were twerking it down, out, and all around to Ciara in the kitchen. There were soggy napkins wadded in clumps from cleaning spilt drinks among the counters and coffee table. Glow sticks were being disbursed, snapped, and rattled before being clamped around wrists and necks, or thrown behind furniture.

The blonde from before, Hadley Hill, swung her arm around Liv again, "Hey, Liv, I've gotta give you my graduation present...in the bathroom." Hadley's blonde tresses floated behind her like a cape as she dragged Liv by the hand to the bathroom. Along the way, she pointed at Charlie, Merrick, and Delaney on the way, who followed behind like a few suited feds. Once the bathroom door was closed, Liv dropped her shorts and sat atop the toilet to piss. Merrick pulled out a joint and began lighting it. While Charlie argued with Delaney, Hadley shook out a sandwich bag of mushrooms, inspecting gold flecks on caps and stems.

Liv had to clutch the excitement in her hands to keep her voice down, "Are you serious?! We're shrooming?!"

"Fuck yeah we are!" Hadley puffed and passed the joint to Delaney, who added, "There's a kink in the situation though."

"What's that?" Liv finished her piss in time for her turn to take a hit.

"Franco's here. He wants to talk about business."

Liv let her head roll back and took a breath before coming back up. When she opened her eyes they rolled forward like reels in a slot machine, "I already had this talk. There will be no more business. He's just mad 'cause this is the last tie we have."

Liv dated Franco for two years and had been his go-between in the weed world for the entirety of their friendship, relationship, and aftermath. While they were homies and would do anything for each other, Liv couldn't connect with him sexually. The first time they fucked, ultimately igniting the relationship, was during an ecstasy blow out at Franco's house. Liv's back and arms were covered in a sharpie art when she found out Franco had decided to take a shower and went straight into the bathroom, flung back the shower curtain and, with clothes on, stepped into the cat ringed tub and the next two years.

Sex was how Liv started most relationships and Franco, having been one of the more successful attempts, happened to have been a best friend from the start. The spark, was something Liv counted on and was continually disappointed by in every relationship and with Franco it had extinguished itself mid-thrust. Even Franco stopped, pulled himself out of her and crept out of the room. It wouldn't be until five years later that Liv would learn that love cannot survive on spark and sex alone but that a trusting friendship built over time was what it truly took to make things work; this you might hear another time.

"It'll be okay Liv," Merrick reassured her, "just remember it's not your responsibility to fix him. He can't help how he feels about you and this will be the best for him. He's drunk as usual by the way."

Liv reached for the bathroom door. Before she opened it, she said, "I'm not surprised. Don't go anywhere. I'll be back before the joint is out." As soon as she was gone, Charlie giggled, "Yeah, right," and the rest joined in, beginning the process of dividing the psychedelic mushrooms next to the bathroom sink.

Focused, Liv searched the party and after some maneuvering she found him in her room, looking through the eye socket of the one antlered deer skull. She had tripped

on it roaming the land with her father last summer. Franco's smile was enormous and his shaggy brown waves brushed into his eyes as he blew in the cranium. "This is fuckin' raw," he says.

Liv smiled and said, "Yeah, I found it near that coyote bowl, ya know, the one with all the dens. There were a lot of bones, but that was the coolest one, plus I didn't want to get ambushed, so I split." The coyote bowl was what her father named the location of their dens. Each den was tucked away safely in the side of a hill that rolled out into a bowl shaped scoop in the ground.

"Hmm, lucky you and unlucky deer," Franco said. "So you're not buying from me anymore, yet you're still selling. You get a new boyfriend dealer or somethin'?" Franco liked to keep things blunt and bare in communication. No need for fluff. His freckles showed the start of his summer tan on his cheekbones and pointed nose. During the winter, Franco's nose always got so cold you'd think it was wet and Liv would snuggle her warm cheek onto it.

Livvy shook her head, "No, but I'd rather not say where I'm getting it from."

His eyes were a glazed over hazel green with tiny red veins lying over the white like mesh, "What if it's someone

that's going to use you as a pawn or doesn't know what they're doing?"

She understood his concern. They had been through some sketchy situations together. Franco had even been pistol-whipped before, "I'll be fine. You'll be fine. We'll be fine. I've got the girls in the bathroom waiting on me to smash some shrooms. I'm happy you came by but we already talked about this."

Franco gripped her arm as she tried to turn away from him, "I want you be honest with me, damn it."

Liv shrugged his hold off of her, "I am being honest. Honesty doesn't mean I have to tell you everything just because you want to know. We're not dating anymore. I found a better deal. It's business."

"Whatever." Franco stormed out of the room, down the hall and out the door. Liv blew out a breath so big she wondered if she'd been holding it the entire conversation.

When she got back to the bathroom, Charlie was the only one sitting on the side of the tub with half a joint in one hand, and Liv's portion of mushrooms in the other. She said, "Took you long enough, I even had time for a quickie."

Liv's eyes opened wide, "What? Who? And where, am I sitting on it?" She looked around and checked underneath

her to make sure there wasn't any baby batter slung in her seat.

"Lawn boy," Charlie said proudly. "Don't worry I cleaned up, he's already gone though. The poor chap couldn't contain himself for very long." Charlie stuffed her mouth full of fungi and asked, "How'd it go?"

Liv ate the mushrooms at once and washed them down with the rest of Charlie's drink. "I'm having deja vu. He left and now I feel shitty even though I know I shouldn't."

Charlie hiccupped, "We should do something weird. Wanna go to Night Trips?"

Liv's face was still puckered from the bland and dusty aftertaste of the mushrooms, "Let's go."

Liv and Charlie were the only two that wanted to go to the strip club and were content sitting center front row, away from any distractions that may bring them back to reality. They each had a drink in hand, and a wad of ones in another.

Charlie said, "I'm worried I'm going to have to kill someone from my work. It really concerns me. How the fuck could someone burn down Chigger Sitters?!" Charlie gulped down half of the vanilla vodka mountain dew before setting it down on the bar. "I should feel thankful, I suppose. I felt insignificant, like I wasn't doing anything exciting with my life."

"You are great with kids!" Livvy shouted, "But if it's not quenching your thirst, then you should see this as an opportunity. You just have to find what you love to do and stick with it, if you want to feel fulfilled and like you've given back up to your own standard." Liv took her shot of whisky, "That's what I have to figure out. I'm a creative writing graduate and I don't even know anyone that likes my vulgar ridiculousness."

The strippers were arranging a row of seven chairs behind the pole, which stood between the chairs and Charlie and Liv. It was time for the free line of birthday lap dances, where the girls would line up and take turns twirling their glittery asses onto redneck crotches. All seven seats were filled with lanky, beer-bellied, middle aged men and couple of clean-cut, douchey, twenty-ones.

At the last moment, another chair was brought up and placed in front of the pole by a plump blonde in a pink string bikini and clear high heels with a fake goldfish in each platform, five feet from the edge of the stage where Charlie and Liv drank and discussed their issues. Charlie stared at the goldfish, mushrooms kicking in, and swore she saw one swim around in the shoe but didn't comment.

Charlie added to Liv's thoughts, "Your writing is a little too intense for most around here especially. Remember Valentine's Day? You created a pamphlet for a fake merkin company and flooded campus with it? Maybe you should just move to a weirder place? Seven!" Charlie pointed to the blonde who was staring at the line and playing with her strings. Liv and Charlie had made up a game to rate the girls on a one to ten scale; an eight or higher meriting a lap dance. Most of the dancers had some aspects of attractiveness: a bubble butt, Disney princess hair, tits

you could suffocate in, or thighs that could clap when their legs met around the pole.

"Yeah," Liv considered Charlie's suggestion, "I don't want to leave you guys and my family though. I'm afraid I'll miss something." Shortly after she finished her sentence, a few guys from across the way started yelling at Liv. Liv's face grew pale and she gripped Charlie's arm, "That's the cop that stopped me in the park today. Officer, fuck what was it, Trout!" The smiling cop got up and made his way over to Liv and Charlie. Charlie yells, "Get that guy away from us! Mylanta, we're shrooming!"

Officer Trout was drunk, out of uniform, and decked out in his white sneakers, grandpa jeans, and flannel shirt. Liv smiled and said, "Hello, Officer Trout, how's it goin'?"

He smiled and slurred, "You remembered my name? That's pretty impressive. Listen," he leaned in close to Liv but his voice didn't lower, "They're onto you." He looked at Liv drunk but seriously. Liv flashed a look at Charlie before turning back to ask, "What do you mean?"

Officer Trout looked around before continuing, "Well, I think you're a sweet girl so I thought I should let you know. Whatever it is you're doing, they're watching you so wrap it up." He patted her on the back as he said, "Enjoy

your night, ladies," and walked back to the table of late thirty-something.

Charlie watched Liv process what had just happened, her pupils black with wonder. Olivia turned to her, "I think I'm in trouble, but let's change the subject for now. I don't want to ruin my trip. What could you do for a living to make you happy?"

The line of birthday bootie bumps had commenced. The men on the stage watched eagerly, some licking their lips.

"Sex." Charlie couldn't have answered the question faster. Having sex would make me happy. Do you know how long it's been for me? Lawn guy doesn't count. Ever since that stalker guy who wanted to make me his vampire, I just get weirded out by most men. And I'm down for all kinds of kinky shit."

Liv nodded, sipping her drink, "Yeah, but that guy wanted you to bite each other all over and roll around in your blood. That is fucking nuts."

Charlie remembered Michael, who seemed completely normal: clean cut, no affliction tees to be seen, no tattoos of his name across his chest or back. *Who the fuck does that anyways? It's like without a sports jersey they forget who they are?!* "What do you think about a sex line?" Charlie asked.

"Eight," Liv pointed to a hot Indian momma with a carved ass and boobs that bounced as if she'd just filled them with water.

Liv returned to Charlie's question, "I think a sex line would be a great job for you. You won't have any problems getting all that attention and making up dirty scenarios plus the creepers stay on the other end of the line and you can imagine that they have beautifully chiseled faces and pecks."

She nudged Charlie as she noticed the first stripper in line had completed her lap dances and was making her way to the blonde in the front seat. The DJ announced that it was the blonde, Heaven's, birthday and that she too would be receiving dances. As the second girl joined the first in dancing on Heaven, Charlie leaned into Liv, "This is gonna be good."

By the time the fifth and final dancer had finished the last male, there were already four strippers on Heaven. Not one of them let loose. They were rubbing and licking her everywhere, the back of her neck, her ankles, and her top was long gone with two girls sucking both nipples. The first dancer, a redhead with sky blues for eyes, had been eating Heaven's pussy for so long, her pink bottoms were

soaked. She finally untied the sides and pulled the bottoms out from under Heaven with her teeth.

At this point, Heaven had been in a state of pleasure unknown to anyone but porn stars. Liv and Charlie had made out with girls before, but this was unlike anything they'd ever seen. Heaven started screaming, her legs spazzing as though they were vibrators, and juice dripped from the chair onto the stage floor. Liv couldn't pull her eyes away but heard nothing, not even music now, the entire club was in a trance, hypnotized by Heaven's moans and wails. When she finished, the redhead kissed her hard and long and slid two fingers into her soaked cunt, making Heaven's eyes pop open and gasp as she fell into red's arms, pulling away from the other strippers, leaving the cum soaked chair and stage behind.

After a flick of shocked silence, the room gushed in applause, Liv finally saw all the money surrounding the stage, and piles of ones, tens, and even twenties were everywhere. The four other girls were scooping them up and stuffing the bills in their studded clutches; Charlie thought one of them hissed at her, showing her sharp canine teeth and red eyes before returning to their normal black dot pupils and luminous smile. Liv finally looked at

Charlie with a stupid grin plastered across her face, "I'm going to write porn."

"Of COURSE you should fucking write porn!" Charlie exclaimed. "I'm going to apply for a sex line!"

The two embraced each other as though all of their prayers had been answered in Night Trips, when Charlie's phone started ringing from an unknown number.

"Hello?"

"It's Delaney. Can you come get me out of county? The carpets are turning into mini oceans and I swear I can feel the salty breeze and it's making my face leak. But I don't think they know I'm tripping yet."

Instead of going to the strip club, Delaney, Hadley and Merrick had changed into paint clothes and headed to the concrete slab Delaney had been drooling over off I-44, dying to make her D Marks stamp next to an emotive image. She went into it knowing that it didn't have to be mind-blowing but that all she required was to grip someone in some way, even if by a quick passing smile that improved one's outlook on the day.

"Encouragement would be everywhere if one could paint the concrete wasteland," was her quote in the 2005 Duncan Demons senior yearbook. Hadley had watched Delaney tag copious amounts of Oklahoma County whereas Merrick had never seen anything tagged outside of Delaney's garage/studio and couldn't shut her flapper, "How many paint cans did you bring? What if you mess up? Don't you have panic attacks all the time? Aren't you worried about cops?"

"Ah!" Delaney blurted out "I will have an anxiety attack if you don't stop the how, what, when, where, and why with me. Jesus Christ!" Thanks to Merrick's constant

rain of questions, Delaney had smoked four cigarettes by the time they had rolled up on the exit. She parked at Coit's Root Beer stand and the three walked over with two gym bags worth of paint, a flask of whiskey, and a bottle of Sprite.

Charlie had purchased a Groupon special CSI: SVU edition of walkie-talkies last spring that Delaney had put to use in her overnight operations. By having a partner communicate via the walkies, she had a lookout for any police, homeless Janes and Joes, and thugs, bored or hired, that may pass by. She had already finished the upper half of a silver robot wearing a cowboy hat and holding a pistol up to the I-44 Bridge over Pennsylvania Avenue when a squatty military jacket hobo rounded the corner from the gas station, south of the slab. He pushed a shopping cart he'd most likely jacked from the Homeland a block away. In it were dinged blankets, some Cheetos, a black hefty bag filled with something soft and something pointed, and a small, once white TV that could play VHS tapes. Its cord, now gunk grey, swung from underneath the basket, perfectly offbeat from the squeaks made in one of the wheels.

"What it do cuh?," he said to Delaney, "you paintin' a robotic masterpiece?"

Delaney turned to see him while keeping her balance on the high incline and pulled down the bandana she'd tied around her face to keep from inhaling the fumes, "Trying to, what do you think of it?"

The man's smile glowed against his dark bearded face, "Make that gun shoot rainbows, baby, and you'll really get 'em goin. Just in time for Pride too."

Delaney was so overwhelmed with joy by the man's comment she had to blink back the tears that filled the inner corners of her eyes. She scooted down the pavement and gave the man four of her cigarettes, a pack of matches, and a pat on the shoulder before climbing back up to her gym bag of paint cans.

On the other side of the street, at the top of the slope, Merrick and Hadley were too distracted with comparing their tits to notice the homeless man. Merrick moaned, disappointed, with one hand on her own boob, the other on Hadley's boob, "Yours feel like water balloons! Mine feel like sacks of gravel." It was true. Merrick's boobs did feel like pebbles in a balloon bag.

Delaney beeped through the walkie, "Good lookout fuckers. I could've gotten shanked by a hobo."

"10-4," Hadley rang in, "It's titty touchin' time so get over tit."

Delaney beeped back, "Roger, Hadley, who's this new dude you're hangin' out with? He looked like a douche lord."

"He is, but I'm just looking' for a frequenter." Delaney could hear Hadley laugh after she'd closed the message with static.

Delaney lit a cigarette, "The fuck is a frequenter?"

Hadley explained through the talkie, "You know, I want a fuck that's easy, breezy but seamlessly frequent."

Merrick shook her head and grabbed the walkie from Hadley, "You know by saying frequenter it almost sounds as though you want them around a lot. It's contradictory."

Delaney beeped in, "Sounds like a load of hypocritical nonsense over. Also sounds like you might be looking for some Cover girl."

Hadley had taken back over and beeped back, "I want him to frequent my downstairs, not the rest of my life. I think of him as laundry. I can toss you behind a door, in a basket, under my sheets, and pull you out whenever I like."

Merrick cried out, "Laundry is the non-stop circulation of the marital household. You keep choosing metaphors that could be viewed either way!"

Delaney statically coughed before she quipped, "You're one of those mixed signal girls, aren't ya?"

"What does he do?" asked Merrick. "Where did you find him?"

Hadley clicked on the walkie so she wouldn't need to repeat herself, "I found him at Franco's party last Friday. He's a pothead, journalism student. He's writing a story about drug dealing in Oklahoma."

Delaney thought to make a mental note of this but it was dropped as soon as she let a can of paint slip out of her hand. She watched it clink and flip and hit the whole way down the slope before turning her walkie on, "I need another drink."

The three cackled until Merrick spotted a cop car rolling down the street, lights off, toward the overpass. She gripped Hadley's arm. Delaney had finished the rainbow mist emanating from the robot's gun when her walkie beeped, "Earth to Delanie, Po-pos, 5-0s, and big pigs with donut ringed fingers!"

It was too late, the cop's spotlight was already on Delaney in her black zip up hoodie; hood down, bandana removed from her ivory face. The cop swung the door open and shot out of the driver's seat, "Stop right there! Get your hands up and work your way down here, please." Delaney couldn't think of any way out and slowly started inching her way down, hands on her head.

Across the street, Hadley and Merrick had tried to scoot down in the shadows along with the liquids but Merrick dropped the flask mid scoot. The stainless steel tin reflected clumps of streetlights over and over as it crashed its way into the metal guardrail at the bottom. The cop, who towered next to his car like a tall and lanky beanstalk, startled a bit before he realized all three girls had taken off down the slopes. His partner, a short guy who looked ex-military, shot out of the passenger side and went after Delaney, leaving the toothpick cop to chase after Hadley and Merrick.

Delaney's combined mental state of mushrooms and beer, led to an adrenalized inebriation that helped her make it past the half block she and Charlie had tried to run earlier that evening. Her lungs were the last thing on her mind as she tore through the green grass in the interchange and headed for the parking lot of the Copa, one of the popular gay clubs, behind Coit's Root Beer Stand. The entire time she coached, *Get control of your head. They don't have to get you for shrooms.* The cop yelled things behind her like: "Stop, cunt!" and "Give your ass up, bitch!," none of which made her turn from her fixated sprint. She was half amazed at herself for making it this far when she hit the graveled parking lot of the club.

Parked cars whipped by like bands of metal as she ditched the cop between fenders and bumpers and through clusters of people leaving at close. Finally, in view was a garage gate she knew she could squeeze through from a night of drunk hide and seek. She had smoked a joint to herself in the garage, waiting to be caught. Just when she cornered a Jeep, her shins ran smack into the enormous gut of a gay man, bent over spewing appetini all over a Jetta.

Delaney's ribcage dented into the Jetta's side mirror without breaking, but swung her into the gravel lot so hard she started bleeding from the rocks chunked in her head. Her eyes hadn't opened yet before the cop heaved her by the back of her hoodie and slammed her into the car hood, "Time to go, pretty dyke."

"Fuck off." Delaney said, spitting the dirt from her mouth.

By the time Officer Choler got Delaney handcuffed and in the backseat of the car, the gangly partner, Officer Thompson, was already waiting empty handed, minus two cokes from the corner gas station, "All right, we don't care that much about your friends since they weren't the ones vandalizing the underpass." He had a guffawed default face that made her so uncomfortable she fought against herself to keep from trying to mimic it.

Officer Choler was still seething from the run he had endured to get Delaney, "All this for a fucking faggot robot? Hope it was worth it."

Delaney thought it best to sit in silence unless she was directly asked a question. She kept her head down so that no one would look directly into her pupils. The painted lines waved down the street and her head was starting to throb when she realized the two officers were arguing.

"I've told you before not to use that derogatory term, Choler. It's ignorant."

"Fuck you." Choler spewed when he talked, "They need to know it's not welcome here."

"No, Choler, fuck you." Officer Thompson cracked a coke and handed it to his partner, "Just because you don't understand something, or it makes you squirm in your seat, doesn't mean you can treat people like dog shit. People have been homo forever so just get over it."

"Oh, yeah? Are you a homo?" Choler teased, "Is that what this is about? Am I hurting your feelings you pussy ass fairy?"

"Yeah," Thompson bit back, "you're hurting my feelings by calling me a fairy. No, I'm not gay, but my Dad is, and I think my kid might be and that kid loves the shit out of

this girl's graffiti. She takes pictures of it anytime she sees it. It's a comfort to her, and the fact that you're going to belittle that ain't gonna fly. Get in the car and shut it."

The cops drove in silence, sipping their cokes the whole way to county. Delaney had kept talking and eye contact to a minimum as they worked through booking and only had a visual of jail bars melting in front of a very large woman with a scabby face. She was relieved to have her phone call and dialed the only friend's phone number she knew by heart, Charlie, "It's Delaney. Can you come get me out of county?"

"Is he still behind us?" Hadley asked as she panted without turning to Merrick, who had fallen a few feet behind. They had passed the Homeland one block away from the tag spot ten minutes ago and had been weaving in and out of backyards, front yards, and graveled alleyways.

Merrick twisted her torso back in the middle of a stride and with no sight of the cop behind them, she cried, "Stop! We can stop now."

Hadley slowly made her way back to Merrick with her hands atop her head, breathing in her nose and out her mouth, a rule buried in her head from high school track to help her breathe and take the weight off of her lungs, "You think Del got away?"

"I fuckin' hope so. Where are we?" Merrick hadn't taken her hands off of her knees since she'd stopped running. Her eyes felt as though they were the size of golf balls when she touched them and gobs of tears continued to trickle down her face in a current. When she looked at her arms she saw her veins pump and light up as if filled with flowing fluorescent.

"We're on Kentucky and I think that's 36th at the end of this hill." Hadley pointed at the intersection that opened up from the clusters of houses they had been running through.

"We should call somebody. Does Delaney have her car keys? Did you see those dogs?" Merrick replayed the escape in her head. Thanks to the mushrooms she'd seen pits with lambent pink eyes and a homeless man that grew blue-purple fur in an instant, looking like a wolf with yellow fangs. He had said, "Run, girlie, run," in a playful and encouraging manner via his dirty old man voice but to Merrick the voice had morphed into a growling threat that made his black eyes glimmer and she screamed, "Granny," as she sprinted past him.

The only other times Merrick had tripped on mushrooms had been indoors with a designated "sober sitter" with the exception of the first time. The first time, she and Liv had eaten fistfuls of wet, freshly found mushrooms picked by Ben and Regan Grigsby in a questionable cow field outside of Vinita, OK. After Olivia and Merrick had eaten the dew covered, mushy contents carried in a wet shoebox, they went to play frisbee golf at Mitch Park. The two decided to stop off the fourth hole, next to a pond, to watch the sunset and instead, let nature lull them to sleep

with flops of jumping fish and the locusts' ring. The passing golfers never noticed the two girls, asleep on each other's shoulders behind the hodgepodge thickness of overgrown goldenrods, elderberries, and weeds.

"I live off 34th and Western if that eases your mind, but I totally left my phone in Del's car and I'm pretty sure she's got her keys," Hadley patted her friend on the back before starting the walk.

Merrick could only think of her own phone and how she had left it back at the house party. *Did we just leave everyone at the house? Had anyone even thought to say goodbye?* She didn't have a clue, nor cared, because now she couldn't take her eyes off a row of lamb's ear, a bush with soft spearmint like leaves, that lined the side of a brick house. It was crying so softly and as she grazed her hand over the top it gasped.

Hadley walked up next to her friend, her head cocked to one side as she observed Merrick's behavior and lit a joint. She had always thought it would be fun to be inside Merrick's head while tripping, just to watch the mental show. She passed the j and said, "I have a dark secret."

"How dark?" She asked, "The bush doesn't want to know if it is too dark." Merrick hadn't stopped petting the bush and was now standing elbows deep, eyes closed, as she

inhaled the joint. She imagined she was at the front of her grandparent's house, rubbing the velvet leaves as she always did when she listened to their grumblings through the open kitchen window, waiting for their words to cease so she could ring the doorbell.

"Maybe we should talk somewhere else then so she doesn't hear." Hadley had taken the joint from Merrick as well as her hand and was leading her away from the weeping bush and back towards the street. The two walked hand in hand as they headed towards Hadley's home.

"Okay, I have a secret too," Merrick said, "wanna trade?"

"Uh, yeah, man," Hadley wrapped her arm around Merrick and released a tight breath of smoke before saying, "I'm the one that burnt down Chigger Sitters."

Merrick chuckled and let her head fall back onto Hadley's arm. She stared at the sky as she said, "I'm preggers."

"Pregnant!? No way. By who? Why'd you eat those mushrooms then?!" Hadley's eyes, once blue but now two black dots from her pupils taking over, grew large with concern.

Merrick began kicking a rock along the street as she filled Hadley in, "I'm not keeping it. I have an

appointment. I've been banging my neighbor. We've been dating for a while actually. I've kept it off the radar for a while, mainly because I didn't want to jinx it, but now this happened and there's absolutely no way I can have a kid right now."

Hadley couldn't contain the panic she had for Merrick, "No shit, you can't! That's the most terrifying thing I've heard. Your vagina would become the Baby Gap, dude. It's probably already scratching you with its fingernails. Ginger baby fingernails! It's got to go." Hadley's greatest fear in life was giving birth after sneaking through her Aunt Gina's VHS tapes at age eight. She had found a cunt close video of her cousin's birth, complete with excruciating screams and damnations leading up to the fuzzy head's debut.

Merrick groaned, "Thanks for that image. God, I want kids eventually but damn it, I just graduated. I still don't have a job, I drink every night and smoke all day and I'm not ready to change that! Not in nine months. Not even in two years. The kid's life would suck." Merrick finally felt a surge of relief that left her with goose bumps. She had known for two days and had bottled the secret of life existing in her womb. It filled her with a stress that she kept swallowing down her throat anytime she felt it come up

and gulped again thinking about it, "Why the hell would you burn down Chigger Sitters? Was it an accident? Did you try to do knife hits and fail or something?"

Hadley had a face of blank grief, the look that takes over once you realize there is nothing you can do to reverse an action, "I did it for Charlie. She didn't ask me to but I know she is miserable."

Merrick tried to hear Hadley out without jumping to assumptions, "Did she tell you she was? How? How do you know that?"

Hadley watched the shadow of a house flicker on and off like a light as they walked, "She's been real distant with the kids for the past six months and last month. I had everyone outside and happened to look in and there she was, sitting there, staring down this banner we had hanging over the chalkboard. It's a crap drawing of the kids, the building, and the two of us. I thought she was stoned by the look on her face but then she lunged at it. She tore at it until the thing was destroyed. Never even saw me, and I stood there the whole time." Hadley shook her head and dropped her hands to her sides when she was done talking with them.

Merrick was still confused, "Why would she do that?"

Hadley's voice emanated heartache and shook as she went on about Charlie, "Because she's spent her entire life thinking this is what she's wanted, and busted her ass for it. Now, it's turned out to only be average."

Merrick stared at the sidewalk as they crossed through Memorial Park, "I'm terrified that's going to happen to me once I become a dietician. I'd definitely feel that way if I had to herd kids all day though." She considered the time she watched a root canal while interning at a dental office. She had gone her entire life believing she was going to be a dentist until she splatter puked across the cabinets, unable to get control of the dry heaves that followed. She left and went straight to the admissions office with vomit still on her scrub pants.

"Yep." Hadley concurred, "I don't mind it but I've caught Charlie researching jobs on our computer so I figured I'd push it. I have an alibi and wore gloves to pour the oil in the oven before I left with it on and I also made sure there happened to be a gas leak so the fire would be everywhere. As far as they're concerned, it's arson with no suspects."

"How do you even know how to do this shit?" Merrick was finally processing what Hadley had done and wondered if

she should be cautious of her friend. "Have you blown anything else up?"

Hadley giggled, "NPR. A long time ago, there was a successful arson story, they knew this donut shop fire was arranged but didn't have any evidence to pin it on anyone. So I looked up how they did it and made sure to include the highest pay for arson in our insurance policy."

"Holy shit." Merrick was amazed at what she was now capable of, "Diane Rehm would eat this up right now," Merrick ran her hands through her red hair and tugged on the ends, the amount of information that filled her head, the stress of the baby, and the relief of finally telling someone had her at a peak of emotion. They were in the middle of the park when she erupted in a roar that only encouraged Hadley to join in with her own outburst.

Once they had depleted their lungs of screams Merrick spit on the ground, "Hey, did we leave everyone at the house without saying bye?"

Hadley thought for a moment, "Yeah, but I left Ricky there and told him to watch everything so it should be fine."

Merrick nodded and noticed a man asleep under the water park awning, "You think it's safe to be out here this late?"

"Well," Hadley said, "we'd only have to be afraid of criminals, which I am one now."

Merrick scratched Hadley's back, "Hey, could be worse, at least you're not about to murder a baby."

Hadley didn't look up from the sidewalk, "You really think its murder at this point?"

"A lot of people do. I'm just trying to make you feel better about blowing up a daycare though."

Hadley punched Merrick in the arm, "At least ginger babies don't have souls. Not of word of this to anyone, right?"

Merrick locked pinkies with Hadley, "Right."

When Mae, a curly haired, four-eyed pothead, rolled into her late night cashier shift at the gas station, she didn't expect to have two girls come in tripping balls in an attempt to test their mushroom tripping abilities in public. However, she was welcome to have some sort of something different from the humdrum cashier mimicry. As she rang up customers, her shift partner, a sorority stricken freshman named Toby, wouldn't stop about her struggle of being in love with some guy that couldn't commit because of his job. Toby had spent her childhood known as Doughy Toby until sixteen, when her mother, a well to do financial advisor, decided to witness the results of liposuction on Toby before going through the process herself. From then on, she was Adobe Toby.

"So, then Maddie told me that she had ran into Scottie, who had said that he had liked me all summer but couldn't do anything about it even though I just graduated high school because his position within the church group requires that he can't date freshmen, which is totally insane because he's twenty-three. Hello?! Maturity! And my other friend Jessica goes, "Well, didn't you know he liked

you before then? He just didn't know what to do and that's why he threw himself at Jenny Pezzly? Seriously?! She was like sixteen and her nose was pinkish from all the pixy stix she snorted, but I think he was like nineteen then, so, it's totally kosher. Anyway, then Maddie said that he's just waiting for this next year to be over and then we can be together! But I totally have this thing for this guy Mike--"

Mae couldn't handle it anymore, "So, go for Mike? Why wait a year for a guy you've never dated?"

Toby immediately clung her heart and gasped before shouting, "But I LOVE him?!"

"Did you just hear yourself sound like every Disney princess in existence? Cuz I did." Mae smiled at a customer who traded the, "Heard that," look of understanding while she handed them their change.

The only two customers left in the store were two girls that reeked of beer, smoke and strippers with pupils for eyes; one short with big tits, the other skinny tall with frazzled curled hair. They sauntered up to Mae's register with orange juice, starburst, and two egg rolls. The curly haired one spoke first in a cluster of loud words that ironed out as she went on, "IneedaPAckO'TurkishSILvers an' a PAcka...PEAch WhItE OWls."

"I'm sorry, what'd you need?" Mae tried to figure out what they were on but kept getting distracted by streaks of glitter on their cheeks and clothes.

She took a calming breath before repeating herself, "Turkish Silvers and peach White Owls please." Her friend, the voluptuous broad with long hair, kept winking at Toby without saying a word.

Toby couldn't take it, "Do I know you?" The girl shook her head no. "Do you have a twitch in your eye?"

The girl cackled, "Maybe. Maybe I'm just excited to see ya." She winked at her again.

Toby looked over at Mae, who was digging in the tobacco storage for Turkish Silvers. She turned back, "But you don't know me?"

"How do you know I don't know you, silly?" The customer's boobs jiggled with her snicker.

"You just told me you didn't know me! Mae, this chick is weirding me out."

Mae turned back with the last pack of Turkish Silvers and the White Owls and laughed, "Relax Toby, they're just tripping on mushrooms or something."

The two customers gasped. The frizzy curled customer clutched the counter and exclaimed, "How did you know?!"

Mae burst out, "Your pupils are gianormous! You can't control your vocal volumes and you sound like you're speaking in tongues half the time." She laughed as the two processed, their rationale bouncing like light in their cartoonish pupils. "Not to mention your selection at 3:30 in the morning."

"Okay," Liv, the lanky girl, said as she tugged on one of her curls, "I'll make you a proposition. It'll take thirty minutes and you can make forty bucks."

At 4:10 A.M. Delaney walked out of county, accompanied by Mae, the cashier. They made their way to Liv's Sebring, where Delaney immediately flung herself into the backseat and Liv gave Mae forty bucks before she drove back to her overnight stint. Delaney giggled as she watched the stranger depart, "So, good job on the finding a sober person to get me out and thanks for the bail by the way." She patted Liv on the back who replied, "Thank my education. Breakfast at Beverly's?" Three nods were all that was needed.

Beverly's Pancake House on NW Expressway had everything that's breakfast to chicken and waffles with deep, comfy red booths and the three roommates had inhaled half of their plates when Delaney finally said, "I invited Molly to come visit."

Liv cried out, "Finally! When?" She and Charlie had been waiting to meet their friend's new girl, even if their relationship was mainly communicated through Skype. They had known plenty of people to successfully meet online, including Liv's cousin Vina, who had met her husband of eight years online. Charlie's friend, Anna had met her partner, Amy, in a chat room and now had a farm they called AA Acres which they ran with their double A tits and four dogs in Oregon. Ultimately, both were happy to see that Delaney had moved on from her previous terror of a girlfriend, Regina.

"Well," Delaney gulped her coffee, "pretty soon actually."

"As in tomorrow soon?" Charlie began chugging her water as she awaited an answer to the point of it dripping down her chin.

"June 13th. It's a Thursday." Delaney didn't lift her eyes when she spoke, a recurring thing Liv noticed in Del when something was bothering her.

"Cool. You excited to see her?" Liv nudged Delaney with her elbow, hoping to get something further from her friend.

"Yeah, kinda," Del said.

"What do you mean kind of?" Charlie pried. "Dude, you're getting laid in five days. I'd be ecstatic." Charlie chuckled to herself as she watched Delaney roll her eyes.

"You would. I am excited, and I'm not. I have another interest...or two." Delaney glanced over at her roommates, who now gawked at her with gaping mouths and big eyes before unloading their comments.

Charlie squinted at her friend, "How do they always come in threes for you?"

"Who are they?" Olivia asked with her mouth full, "More Skype skanks?"

Charlie gasped, "Do we need a sinternetvention?"

Charlie and Liv laughed with amusement, ending in a high five. Delaney wasn't amused and pointed a bite of biscuits and gravy at them, "I don't appreciate you two making light of my situation."

"No, it's definitely heavy with that many women, especially if you're all on the same cycle." Liv finished with a breakdown of pretend drumbeats that she rang out with her fork and spoon. Then she said, "Okay, for real. Explain yourself."

"Lana hasn't stopped texting me since we did karaoke the other night at Hudson's and Merrick accidentally spit on that lady's car in front of her." She scrolled through

her texts to show them she wasn't lying. The list of blue and green message bubbles seemed as endless as a tween's twitter.

Charlie crinkled her nose as she frowned, "I thought she was straight?"

Liv giggled, "Isn't everyone Del dates?"

"Yes, she's straight but she's flirting with me."

Delaney grinned as she said this.

"Give us somethin'. Go." Charlie leaned back with her chin in as though she were a flirtatious text consultant, which she wouldn't mind being and was reminded of the self-discoveries at Night Trips, "Wait! I'm going to work for a sex line and Liv's going to write porn."

Delaney was thrown aback, "What? What do you mean?" The two quickly recapped everything that happened in excruciating detail to their friend, who sat with jaw opened, mentally terrified thinking about the possible number of diseases distributed over the sex show she had thankfully missed. Delaney had become a devout germophobe early in life when her mother showed her every unbearable picture of every kind of sexually transmitted disease. When they finally came to the end point of their career choices all Delaney could say was, "Okay, well you two were clearly

tripping your balls off. We'll discuss this when we we're sober."

"Yep. Anyways, Del's cruisin' for a schmoozin'." Liv nudged Charlie's shoulder, who shoved her back and said, "Dive in that, Del."

Delaney nodded in agreement, "But then there's Bev and I think I might be in love with Bev."

This caused the two to stop their antic immediately. Liv went first, "Wait, Bev is our friend."

Charlie couldn't stop stirring her coffee, "Not to mention she's leaving soon. You can't. You can't leave with her. How did you just come upon this? We've been friends for years."

Liv began stacking the plates, "If this were a sitcom, you should've had something going by the third season at the latest and we are clearly on season seven or eight."

Delaney was shocked that her friends were so against her and Bev, even if she was a crazy coke head headed to Colorado to paint and get clean while smoking copious amounts of pot and doing five hot yoga sessions a week. She still made them cookies every Christmas and appeared regularly with surprise blunts and vodka. "But you guys like Bev?!"

"Correction," Charlie crooned, "We love Bev."

Liv snapped a finger gun at Delaney, "Precisely. The friendship has too much value. Go with Lana or go with your already labeled girlfriend, Molly."

Delaney's phone beeped and she checked her email. *Who is messaging me at 6 in the morning?* It was an email from Mickey Redd, an old friend of Liv's:

Dear Ms. Delaney Marks,

I hope this note finds you well and that your weekend is getting off to a splendid start! I just drove by your latest tag next to Coit's and am absolutely in love with it. Our mutual friend, Ms. Olivia Grigsby, had informed me of your latest passion in graffiti and I completely adore your dedication, style, and message. I'm opening a club within the next two weeks. I have been searching for an artist to paint an all-encompassing mural since my club is called OUT. Please contact me as soon as possible if you're interested and have the time. Perhaps we can meet today for lunch to discuss the pay and deadline. Do take care, and please be in touch!

Yours truly,

Mickey Redd

"Holy shit," Delaney couldn't help saying aloud, "You guys I'm going to do a mural for OUT! We need to get home, I need to smoke, sketch, and shower."

When the three arrived home, they were greeted at the driveway by a trail of littered beer cans and solo cups leading to the door, held ajar by a bottle of vodka. The only one left in the house was Ricky, who was sprawled out halfway on and halfway off of the couch with a pipe in one hand, a remote in the other, and a puke bucket next to his head. Liv, who couldn't stop forgetting that Ricky was dating her friend Hadley, kicked his legs off of the couch, "Move it or lose it chum bucket, I got a blunt to roll."

His eyes were bloodshot and he blinked several times before moaning his way off the couch, "Where've you been? Where's Hadley?"

"She's at home and doesn't have her phone." Charlie said as she plopped onto the couch and took over the TV, "Del had a mishap overnight but it's all good. When did people clear out?"

Delaney was starting a pot of coffee when she noticed all of Liv's writing scattered across the kitchen table. This would be normal had Liv been working all night but she had put everything away for the party yesterday morning. She hollered from the kitchen, "Yo, Livvy, your novel is thrown around the table like you gave up or somethin'."

Liv shot up, carrying the marijuana filled wrap in her hand. She studied the kitchen table as she rolled and

licked the edges of the paper holding the shredded green. There was an organized chaos to her notes and manuscripts that she had never arranged: chapters stacked perpendicular when she would never separate them and the notebook closed with the pen on top when she would always leave it, opened to the last page she'd written in, the pen clipped on the spiral. Next to all of this was a stack of scribblings, the handwriting foreign to her but with character details and an organized timeline of her novel. *That's not just reading.* She remembered she had put everything away on the desk in her room.

Without a word she immediately turned and went down the hallway and looked in her room to find her desk and dresser drawers opened. An empty space remained where she had cleared on her cluttered desk and placed her manuscript.

She walked across the hall, straight through Charlie's bedroom to the closet. She opened the door and saw a reusable Half Price books bag with five books inside and paused, sealing the blunt before lighting it. She shut the closet door before returning to the living room and picked up speed as she came down the hallway, puffing the blunt like a dragon. She picked up a jacket, the only one she

didn't recognize, and threw it at Ricky. "Go home," she demanded.

Ricky fought an expression as he said, "What's up chick?"

"Family meeting," Liv answered coldly.

"Oh, you don't you can consider me family now that I'm dating Hadley? I mean, I know about--"

"Hardly," Liv cut at him with her words through a stone stiff face but her eyes were lit from within, "you're not given an all access pass just because one of us is getting off. Get goin'." She threw her arm towards the door, presenting the exit. Dangle, the Doberman, had followed her down the hallway and now rallied next to her, growling off of her energy. Ricky grabbed his keys and grumbled as he passed her, "You'd think you would treat the person who watches your house all night with a bit of nicety."

Liv snatched Ricky's head by his hair and hurled him towards the front door. Dangle was now on all fours, eyes dilated black, barking and snarling through his bared teeth. Liv sarcastically sneered, "Not when they dig through the trash. Get 'em Dang."

Ricky had been tearing the door open since she'd flung him at it, so when Dangle leapt for his ankles, he only

clipped the one left in the door. Ricky yelped as he tore out of the dog's grip. The door shut on Dangle but the gargantuan beast was not phased and stood on his hind legs barking at the door.

Liv shot to the peephole in time to watch Ricky wince off the porch and rush to the drive, limping every other step. She hadn't looked through the peephole since the blustery fall morning eight months ago when she broke up with Franco. She had admitted to herself that their relationship would never reach anything more than a friendly homie status. No matter how hard Franco tried to get Liv off. The crucial element of lustful craving wasn't there and never was. He had rolled into her that chilly morning and it had been in mid thrust that she felt herself crack and gape open with the exhaustion of her heartache. She'd never cared for anyone so deeply nor wanted anyone to work out so badly, but Franco pulled away with tears in his eyes and said, "I felt that."

She had tried cumming for years, thinking she was the problem or that her g spot was defective or nonexistent, (after all, the guy she'd lost her virginity to wasn't all that easy with his eight inch flaccid dick) and settled on the belief that she'd never have an orgasm and had told

herself she was fine with this enough times that she'd started to believe it.

She was in part to blame, not because of the supposed defective vagina, but because she had yet to learn her detached nature constructed a mental wall that would have to be wrecked herself, not conquered by drunken boys with battering rams. Liv would learn this eventually but not until she had plowed the majority of hockey team's defense line (resulting in battered bathrooms with man sized holes and her newfound ability to mimic an Illinoisan accent), a few random girls (in case she was confused and didn't realize, but it always felt awkward for her), three drug dealers, and an Eminem lookalike (the low point of her declared cum quest.)

She would eventually give up, spending another year trying to think about everything but sex. Liv didn't rule out the possibility of being blindsided by a good ol' boy with bone lanky legs. He would give her all the eye striking leg spasms, pillow muffled screams, and sheet gripping frenzies a girl could ever hope for but not yet.

"Down Dangle," was all Liv said before she returned to the couch and passed the blunt to Delaney, "Something's not right there."

Over the course of the next few weeks, Charlie had become one of the most requested phone sex operators the dirty department at KinkHoes had ever seen. She usually let most callers take the lead, asking them what they wanted to hear, but then somewhere in the transaction she would take them by the hand and introduce them to the cobwebbed corners of their unexplored fantasy closet. She invested in a headset and kept lotion, a glass of water, stiletto heels and a belt to smack cushions with her at all times. She would walk around the house with a headset on, saying things seductively like, "What a good boy," or even, "My tits want to hump your meat."

The roommates had grown used to having Charlie home more often, but Liv would have to stifle her laughter whenever Charlie passed by on a phone call. Delaney, however, would often gag at the thought of a crude stranger heaving his sweaty masturbation breath into her friend's ear and would cover Baby Alec's ears when he was over. Often times, she would gag and run for the other room to avoid being heard and taken over by a nauseating image.

One day, Charlie had a far-fetched fetish game going with a man who was obsessed with My Little Ponies and referred to himself as a "brony." Charlie had taken her time describing her bush to be a rainbow dyed mane of luscious glittery locks with a smooth pink dildo attached and whispered to him, "Ride my little rainbow pussy. Tug on my tail. Smack my cutie mark." To which, the caller neighed and nickered back. Charlie stuck a sucker in her mouth at times like these to A. keep from busting out in laughter and B. the sucking sound drove weird creeps wild.

Liv sat across the living room from Charlie, smoking weed with eyebrows raised in amazement at the product of her friend's imagination and shrugged. *Whatever creams your Twinkie.* She was working on her latest porn script, her first three already taking off as soon as they were put into her agent's hands. She found her agent, Piper James, through an old resident, Anastasia, she'd met in her three years working as a resident assistant for the university.

Anastasia was a Russian business student who lived for two things: vodka and stripping. She would travel every other weekend to Dallas where she was airbrushed, tweezed, and done up for lawyers, doctors, financial advisors, and the like. She would return late on Saturdays, during Liv's overnight shift working the dorm's front desk. They would

count the cash she carried in a metallic clutch with a lock and Liv never once saw the number sink lower than three grand. Two nights. Three grand.

Since those days, her Russian friend had moved to LA where she was an escort some nights, an exotic dancer others, but usually a daytime secretary for a high-end titty entertainment industry. Liv only had to make one phone call to be connected with Piper, an Oklahoma native with a love for absurdity and sex. Piper only had to read the first script, a bad barista scenario complete with naughty espresso implications, lappings of bone dry lattes, topped with explosive whipped cream and caramel drizzle to say, "You're an animal."

By the time Charlie had finished her pony pervert phone call, Liv was almost ready for her lunch date with Piper. Liv turned as she rummaged through the basket of dusty sunglasses they kept at the door, "You should come with me and meet Piper. It'd be good for you to have her as a connection."

Charlie agreed and had wanted to meet Piper after seeing how fast she got Liv's writing put into production. The plan was to meet at Around the Corner, a small restaurant tucked into downtown Edmond, and discuss the next script. Liv had mentioned it would be a rendition of

what she and Charlie had experienced watching Heaven at the strip club.

When they pulled up to the diner decorated in everything that was chicken and Oklahoma football memorabilia, Piper was already standing at the door. She was smoking a cigarette with her blonde hair in a topknot and sunglasses to cover the stoned in her eyes. Piper carried the air of Kim Kardashian in her blouse yet rolled with a chill ghetto vibe on her painted nails and spoke with a thick and smooth Southern accent.

"Hi, lovers! You must be Charlie, so nice to meet you." Piper said as she hugged and kissed them both, "What's good here besides fried pies? Do they got biscuits and gravy?"

Just then, coming out of the front door was Ricky, wearing tragically frayed corduroy shorts that made him look like a lost boy, but at least he wasn't wearing the skele-toe shoes. Charlie watched Liv's face fill with red under her sunglasses all the way down her neck and collarbone. Charlie turned to Ricky, "What's up man?" She wanted to keep things from getting awkward and hateful for Hadley's sake.

Ricky completely ignored Charlie's greeting, "Hey Liv, I'm sorry I got your novel out and dug through it. I was

fucked up and bored and knew you had it somewhere so I figured I'd take advantage."

Liv's mouth tightened into a straight short dash before lashing, "I know you were looking for more than my novel you dumb shit. It was clearly laying on top of my desk and you had all of my drawers open, with both of my laptops out, and you'd gone through my scrapbook. I don't know what you're trying to find but it ended there. Get the fuck out of my way." Liv hiked up the steps and into the front door, followed by her two companions. Piper chuckled as she passed Ricky and leaned into him as she cockily said, "Told," when she flicked her cigarette.

As they went to sit down, you sat yourself there, they passed by a table of rowdy cops and Charlie, knowing that Liv wouldn't want to be recognized by them, walked in between her friend and the swine table. They did look at them but kept their focus on Piper and Charlie's tits, both sets were gargantuan and bounced with the tiniest giggle.

Charlie watched, thinking Liv would slide into the side of the booth that kept the cops from seeing her face. She was right. Not soon after they ordered Piper received a phone call. She muttered shit before she answered annoyingly, "Hello? What do you mean she has a ringworm the size of Texas in her thigh? Mercy. You can't put a spin on

it? Ringworm girl fucks ice cream man? Damnit." Piper hangs up.

"What the fuck was that about?" Liv asked, the ice cream man porno was the first one she'd written for Piper and was supposed to be filmed today.

"Fuckin' Betty BoopsAlot has a ringworm and it's jetting out of her inner thigh. Apparently you can't help but see it no matter what position they put her in. I'm going to have to reschedule everything." Piper started tapping her thumbnail on the table, her eyes were still, fixated into a think mode.

Liv gulped her coffee and said, "You know Charlie is a sex line operator. She sounds fantastic on the phone. She's a real fucker."

Charlie watched Piper eye her up and down with a contemplative look that curled into a devil's smile, drooling at the imagined outcome. She felt exposed, as though no one was supposed to know what she did for a living because then they would look at her the same way Piper did just then. Piper finally spoke, "Charlie would you like to make a porno?"

Charlie thought about her family, who, as far as she knew, never watched porn, nor did anyone in her immediate life. Although she knew that she may meet porn viewers

along the way, she couldn't help but smile at the chance to fuck for a living. She replied, "As long as my name can be Tess Tickle." And thus, a porn star was born.

They wrapped up lunch and Charlie hopped into Piper's Lexus. As Charlie and Piper drove off, Charlie saw Liv stop to talk to a beautiful redhead and wondered what the odds are that the girl was Jackson, the girl Liv had met the night before graduation. Piper had dropped by her office to pick up the paperwork and had Charlie fill it out on the way. The site was on an abandoned alleyway with an ice cream truck parked halfway down, next to a graffiti wall of a warehouse and a blue dumpster.

When they got out two men approached Piper's Lexus, one with a ball cap and flannel that Charlie thought looked familiar and the other wore only white pants and a black bowtie with a white cap on top, clearly he was the ice cream man. The ice cream man spoke first, "So you're Tess Tickle, huh? I look forward to fucking the scream out of you." He held his hand out and Charlie shook it with a wink replying, "Likewise."

The cameraman shook her hand next and let a wide smile expose a missing canine. His shirt read: *Women be obscene and not heard*. He introduced himself as Larry the cameraman and directed Charlie to a dressing room where she changed

into a teeny overall outfit with pink sneakers and a tank top that looked made to fit a five year old. When she stepped out she could feel the breeze on her side boob, lower back and belly.

Upon Larry the cameraman calling action, Charlie ran up to the truck, playing its song. She asked the man for some ice cream and he tells her she has to scream for it. She agrees and hops on board when he says, "Let's get sticky."

Once inside Tess Tickle asks if he's got any ice cream on a stick. The ice cream man smirks and says let me whip one up for ya, ripping open his pants, which release his heavily chocolate coated hard on. He says, "How's a chocolate coated banana?" Tess Tickle giggles and says, "Just the way I like it, with cream on the inside." She begins eating the chocolate coating off of his dick and looks up at him to ask, "How many licks does it take?"

After she's eaten the chocolate coating he coats her in whipped cream and sets her on the counter. He fucks her while licking the whip cream piles off of her huge tits, which he's topped with cherries. Charlie thinks she's officially transcended into the life of Tess Tickle and will never be the same. She probably wouldn't have thought

this, or even agreed to fill in for the ringworm actress if she knew what was coming.

He flips her over, plunging into her from behind and tells her to scream as he takes a double scoop cone and dumps it on her back. She continues to scream for ice cream over and over before finally asking if she'll get an ice cream paint job.

He picks up the cone and says, "Nah, I like it clean on the inside with cream on the outside." With this statement, he shoves the cone up her asshole and whips his penis out to cum all over the sundae he's made on her back. The butting of the cone against her anus caused Charlie to flush with red and turn towards him with an automated, "What the fuck man?!" She didn't know she would be turning to face an immense sperm line of fire that ejaculated straight into her eyes.

The sperm seared to the back of her eyeballs and she couldn't see anything for a moment. She screamed and cursed and with one fluid blind swing she punched the ice cream man straight in the package. He fell over onto some ice cream tubs and screamed into a high-pitched moan. Charlie stood, "Told ya I'd make you scream," and exited the truck.

Piper had ran off before they got started filming, figuring everything would go well. This left Larry the

cameraman in charge. Larry was livid, "Hey cunt, you fucking ruined the finale!"

"Fuck off obscene Larry, he fucking ruined my eyesight and now the world just looks like a bag of dicks." The ice cream man was no lying on the cold metal floor of the truck in the fetal position. He whimpered as Charlie hopped off the truck, causing it to bounce ever so gently. Charlie grabbed a scoop of ice cream off of her back and threw it at him. Larry was shocked, "We can't even reshoot because you hurt him so bad! You don't punch a guy in the dick."

"Look," Charlie threw herself in Larry's face, "he came in my eyes so I punched his one eye. I think he'll be okay, at least he can fuckin' see!" Charlie started licking the melted goop off of her fingers.

"You're fired. You know that?"

"Whatever. You still have to take me home."

Delaney strummed her fingers onto the rim of the seat she sat in at the Baggage Claim 3 of Will Rogers airport. The overhead speaker had announced that flight 818 from Salt Lake City was landing and her girlfriend, Molly, would be here shortly. Del drew in a deep breath and promised herself she would make the most of her visit even though her feelings were compromised. She looked up to the escalator as it brought down the United passengers. Eventually she spotted the Molly's black spiky hair. When Delaney finally saw her face, Molly didn't hold a look of joy, but a look of grumpy indifference and didn't hug her when she walked up to say, "I am only here as your friend. No fucking will be happening. Hate to burst your bubble."

Delaney blinked hard and squinted at Molly as if she hadn't heard her, "Yeah. Hi, hey, how are ya?"

Molly snapped into an ecstatic smile, "Great. Yeah, how are you?"

Delaney rolled her eyes, seized Molly's rolling suitcase from her and pulled it behind her to the escalators, "Why didn't I see this coming?! Is this why

you've been "super busy" and haven't been able to Skype me except for two times in the past two weeks?"

Molly caught up to Delaney, "It's not that there's someone else. I've just been doing a lot of thinking and..." She let something catch her eye but Del saw right through her attempt to fly off the subject.

Del clenched her jaw and grumbled through her perfectly straight teeth, "And you couldn't wait to run off the plane and tell me about this brilliant idea you've come up with." During the escalator ride she pulled out a cigarette, ready to light it the moment they stepped outside. She wasn't pissed this was happening, that Molly just wanted to be friends, but the way Molly was trying to handle it made her livid, "You didn't have to come to Oklahoma to tell me that, you could've done it over the phone or text me for fuck's sake. Mylanta. You even text me before your flight took off with X's and O's. The fuck is up that bullshit?"

Molly stared at her shoes as she walked and rubbed the thick mess of ebony hair on her head; the spikes jutted and popped out like feathers on a crow's ass. She threw her hands up when she said, "Look I felt bad because you bought the ticket and we've had so much fun together before I just thought maybe we could do it as friends this time and not

waste a trip. I thought you quit smoking by the way? Didn't you do Chantix?"

Delaney had tried Chantix and after a month's worth of sweat soaking nightmares about her dogs eating entire prescriptions of Adderall and grinding her molars to be smooth as marbles, she finally became nauseous at the thought of a cigarette. But then Cinco de Mayo happened and after seven free Jell-O shots from the Fish City bartender, she lit up a Turkish Silver, puked after the first puff, then kept on puffing, never looking back. She frenched the smoke as she gruffly said, "Fuck off right now, dude." She slung the luggage in the back of her hatchback, yanked the door down, and off they went.

As soon as they started the car, Delaney's window was down and she blew streaks of smoke through it repeatedly like a steam train. She turned up the Yeah Yeah Yeahs and let Karen O's voice shrill through the speakers and bounce off the ears of passersby. She drove straight to OUT, mainly because she needed a drink to chill out, but also because she wanted to show the mural to Molly. The only thing Molly turned to say during the drive was, "No air conditioning. In this heat? Really?" Delaney only had to shoot her an intense glare to get her to shut up.

Mickey Redd, was standing outside, smoking when they got there. He had white blonde hair swept to one side, tan skin, and eyes bluer than the sky; basically a Ken doll come to life but not so stiff in nature. He smashed his cigarette out into the side of the wall and tossed the butt into the can propping the door open before saying, "Hello! It is so good to see you again, Del. I am loving the mural! Is this your Montanan lady friend? Hello, I'm Mickey Redd, can I fashion you up a drink?"

Molly shook his hand tenderly, as if she were scared his strong hand would crush hers, "Sure, martini?" As she drew away both Delaney and Mickey noticed Molly's nails were filed into sharp triangular points painted black. Mickey chortled and said, "Whatever you want just don't slice and dice my good friend's vagina with those illuminati nails."

Molly rolled her eyes to Delaney, "I think I can managed that," reaching for Delaney's hand as she said it through the innocent blinking of her doe eyes.

Delaney jerked her hand away, "Get away from me kitten claws. Seriously? Did you really have to forge yourself into a defense mechanism?"

Molly smirked and purred at Delaney, who released an exasperated sigh and groaned her way into the club. Molly followed her, meowing the whole way in.

When you first step into OUT, you are at the top of three platform levels. From the top you can see the lower two levels through a glass wall lining the edge of the top floor, except for the extravagant entryways to the next levels. These were built with two gaudy nine-foot goblets on either side, meant to hold dancers that have "wine" showering down on them. Mickey completed the nice touch by supplying the dancers with large purple grapes to be used as props. The second level consists of various seating areas with modern couches, tables, and stools at minibars for seating. The third floor, at the very bottom, had a glitter black floor with confetti and glitter sprayers hung from the ceiling.

The main thing that caught your attention when you first stepped in was the panoramic span of the mural that runs along a curved wall in the shape of half moon. The mural, although not quite finished, had an Edenesque setting with three couples kissing throughout the jungle: a gay couple, a straight couple and a lesbian couple.

Molly gushed over the club and Delaney's painting, "I absolutely love it! When will you be finished?"

Mickey Redd sipped on his own martini and interjected, "Hopefully by tomorrow night. She's almost done though. Do you think you'll have time for a final top coat?"

Delaney nodded her head as she sipped on her whiskey and Sprite, "Mhmm. I'll be back first thing in the morning to work on it."

Molly tilted her head to one side, "But, babe, what about breakfast?"

Delaney flashed her a warning look of eyes on fire, meant to say, *You won't call me that anymore.* Molly looked deep into her martini. The message was received, with Mickey chuckling to himself at Delaney's reaction.

After their drinks with Mickey Redd, the two went straight to meet the girls at The Other Room, a small bar they frequented in the Paseo Arts District. When they walked in, Hadley and Liv were already downing firebomb shots; a cinnamon whiskey shot that often made Delaney puke for hours. Charlie had text Delaney: *Can't make it. Bad day. Don't tell Liv yet.* Delaney shrugged it off. If it ever was a real emergency, Charlie would phone until she picked up.

As soon as they approached Liv and Hadley, Molly refused to stop complaining about how hot it was in Oklahoma, how Delaney's car sucked because it didn't have

air conditioning, how Montana's climate was "so much more enjoyable," and how she couldn't believe how unhealthy Oklahomans were with their drinking, smoking, and topping everything off with ranch dressing or gravy.

Hadley and Liv were munching on a pizza from the connected restaurant next door, Picasso's, and once Hadley had swallowed her bite she spit out, "Well, if you can't take the heat get the fuck out."

Liv laughed and tried to keep from choking as Molly walked away from the three, looking disappointed that they didn't join in her anti-Okie rant.

Delaney shook her head, "Thank you. I'm so ready to be done with that."

Hadley laughed, "I'm glad you're here now. I want to hear from both of you why Dangle bit my boyfriend. I haven't heard your side yet but ever since, Ricky won't stop bitching about it." Hadley tried to laugh off the awkward moment, but Delaney could tell she was concerned by the way she darted her eyes between the two and then to her drink again and again.

Hadley had a tendency to come off cold and rigid in times of confrontation and tender situations. She always tried, though sometimes she needed a reminder of the bigger picture and Delaney was one of those people Hadley often

came to when she needed input from the outside. Delaney jumped in, "When we came home I noticed Liv's novel was spread out all over the kitchen table."

Liv was already fired up about the subject, "Yeah, I had it stacked in my room because we were cleaning house the other day. So I run back to room and find every drawer in the desk and dresser pulled out and dug through. It was a mess. I panicked because I thought he'd found my stash, but it was still in the books my brother hid in Charlie's closet."

Hadley listened with her big eyes bugging at certain details, followed by a silent "What." She started to say something but Delaney cut her off because she wanted to make sure she knew, "He said something about being family just because he was with you and that we should treat him better for watching the house. Liv got mad and told him to get out."

Liv jumped in, "When he argued, I sicked Dangle on him. I wouldn't have let Dangle hurt him, I just wanted Ricky to take me seriously. There was no fear in him and I can't have that with all that's at risk."

Hadley looked away for a moment, processing, and then said, "He used to ask about everyone and how we all met. I thought it was sweet that he was so interested in me and my

friends. But now he only asks about you. It's like clockwork. He tells me a story about you, or Ben and Regan and goes on about how well he knows you. He's even tried to ask about your and Franco's relationship or your access to weed. He'll ask me if I can get absurd amounts from you, like pounds."

Delaney watched her friends, both were puzzled by Ricky's actions but Liv's face grew pale. Liv turned to her, "Something's not right about this. It's like he thinks he has a right to my life just because we've known each other for so long. I think he may know too much somehow."

Liv ordered a round of shots and waved at Molly, who came running as soon as she saw the liquor. Molly grabbed the shot that Liv handed to her, scratching her hand with her sharp nails. Liv raised an eyebrow, "Hey kitty claws, don't be kneading my friend's dough."

Molly took her shot, stuck her tongue out, and ran to the karaoke line. Hadley watched her go, "What's up with that? I mean, I like karaoke but damn."

Delaney reached over the bar for cherries as she explained, "Molly thinks she's the Justin Timberlake of drag kings just because she performs at a club every Tuesday in a suit and tie with three other drag kings," Delaney held her hand to the side of her face so Molly

couldn't read her lips, "In my opinion she's too nasally, but I was too nice at the time to tell her. She told me she just wanted to be friends as soon as she stepped off the plane by the way."

"What the Hell," Liv peevied off, "I mean, you pay for her ticket and she comes anyways knowing she's going to end it? I guess you can figure out shit with Lana now?"

Delaney shrugged, Liv had a point, but she was still curious as to why Molly was acting so odd. She kept from watching Molly directly by watching Hadley's reactive expressions, who luckily couldn't stop watching Molly. Hadley was alarmed, "She think she's going to blow us away with her talent and we'll worship her like she's Ciara or Beyoncé? She's close up singing to the chick behind her in line." Delaney turned to see for herself and the girl was eating it up, even though Molly was stranger singing three inches from her face. A group of people tucked in a side booth were recording the whole thing on their phone, giggling as they watched through the tiny lit up screen.

All three continued watching the karaoke line performance go on, occasionally sipping their cocktails. A voice more nasally than Molly's wailed over the top of their heads, "Oh my God. You guys!" The voice belonged to the one girl they held to the basest respects. They froze.

Delaney mutter, "Fuck," and glancing at Hadley's eye, already twitching, they began to turn together.

Delaney's ex-girlfriend, Regina, was beaming at them with her bulbous Jew nose scrunched into her forehead, a tendency Delaney remembered making a note of when they drank together; this meant she was at about an 8 on the 1-10 drunk scale. Thoughts flooded through her head, *Why can't Lana be here right now?! Reg would be so jealous! All would be right with the world! Liv and Hadley are gonna freak. Liv's waited for this moment since Reg tried to steal her dog.* Upon realizing everything that was happening, she thought she might have an anxiety attack.

To sum the past up, Adobe Toby style: "So, okay, the reason they, like, ended it was because Delaney discovered messages on Facebook from some Luis, saying things like, 'I can't wait to f you again baby.' When Del confronted Reg, Reg lied, but before that Reg had lied about hanging with Samantha, Reg's ex-girlfriend, who had committed suicide recently. Then Reg goes, 'Well, you know Sam's death was all you keeping me from her,' and then Delaney, who's effing furious, jumps out of the car at the red light and walks four miles in the rain to get home. But the thing about it is that Del doesn't even know about Reg cheating on her with Rose, her poodle's veterinarian, or Annalee,

her "study partner." But Del found out about Regina faking nursing school and pretending to graduate and telling everyone to throw her a party for said fake accomplishment. Desperate and lame. Regina has yet to admit to that faux pas. She's a total C U next Tuesday, if you know what I mean."

"It's been a while," Regina said overly interested, "What've you guys been doin?" She stood in tan sandals, wearing a silky cream dress. Her massive black horse hair swept down her back, but the swelling from her liposuction hadn't gone down enough to keep the poked and sucked patches from pudging against the fabric. "You all look so cute," Regina said, reaching over to stroke Liv's exposed midriff. Liv swatted her hand immediately. Hadley rolled her eyes and turned to go to the bathroom.

Liv began lighting matches and stared coldly, "Del did the mural for OUT. It opens soon." Delaney knew Liv hated Regina, for many reasons, Regina coming between her and Liv being the most important one. Liv wore a look of a playful shit on her face though, the one that she wears when she takes things too far. Regardless, Delaney joined in, she liked this 1-up game, "Liv got her Master's. Summa cum laude."

Regina turned her focus towards Liv, "How did that happen? You're the laziest student ever."

Liv's eyebrows raised and rested before she coolly replied, "I cut some bullshit out of my life. Plus, I don't fake my accomplishments."

Regina accepted the comeback with silent glance around the bar before she began rapping her knuckles against the wood rimmed edge of the bar. Delaney kept waiting for whoever Regina was there with to join the conversation but no one ever came up. Regina spoke with a thickness in her nose that made Delaney cringe worse than nails on a chalkboard, "I thought I wouldn't be glad to see you guys, but then, there you were and I was like, Oh, my God, I've missed them so much! We used to be so close you guys!"

Delaney sarcastically laughed until she let it die off. Regina had ordered four shots of tequila and handed them out, but both girls said versions of "No, thanks."

Anytime Regina started passing out shots, it ended up bad. The last time Regina had gotten Delaney's friends drunk, Liv ended up so wasted in a hookah bar she'd never been to at 5 A.M. She stood there, slurring "Welcome!" to Delaney as she walked up. Liv was completely unaware that Regina was making out with a slimy hookah bar owner an arm's length away. Not to mention, Liv was also oblivious

that Merrick was going at it with two short-skirted blondes on a couch in the corner. Liv's only defense was that Regina had kept buying her shots and the hookah bar had a wonderfully green light and smoke show that took any bit of her focus away to enjoy dancing with the lasers on an empty dance floor to Sleigh Bells.

Regina was outraged that they refused the shots. She flared her nostrils and Delaney thought she looked like a pig. She was so disgusted by Regina that she couldn't remember why she was ever attracted to her. Regina lashed out, "What do you mean, I just bought those! It's a peace offering. Fuck, I'm sorry I lied about grad school."

Delaney couldn't help but react, "Oh, now you admit it?! Fuck off."

"It's over a year too late and we don't need nor want them." Liv said bluntly before sipping her 7 & 7.

Regina's face paused as if she were trying to stifle the anger she felt, but try as she might the fury started seething from her eyeballs. She snatched Delaney's whiskey and coke and chugged what was left, about half a cup. When she was done she wiped the wet from her lipsticked mouth. In an instant, she grabbed one of the shots and threw it in Liv's face, who began licking her lips, eyes squinted shut.

Delaney worried Liv would snap but she appeared to be enjoying the Jose Cuervo in her face.

Regina didn't stop there. She reared back and spit in Delaney's face, the stench of smoke and Jose taking over any hope of oxygen. Delaney thought she might vomit. Regina shot a conquering smile, paired with a "Hmpf" and turned, her long black mane whipping behind her. This was when Liv lost it. Her hand shot into the mass of Regina's hair and yanked her back, pulling her down so that her head slammed into the wooden edge of the bar. She went down screeching but Liv was already on top of her, knees pinned into her shoulders, pouring the other Jose shots in her face. Liv said ever so sweetly, "That stank face of yours makes ya look a little parched, Reg."

Hadley returned from the bathroom, emerging from the crowd that was quickly forming, and with no questions, hocked a long loogie straight into Regina's nose. It splattered against her sad, smushed facial expression. Liv and Hadley pulled Regina to her feet and shoved her towards the door, she tripped and lumbered and yelled a whiny drunk's mumbo jumbo as she clumsily exited.

The bouncer, a beefed Latino who usually had a nice smile but instead had a terrifying scowl cemented over his face, was already towering behind the three and said, "You

guys gotta go. Move it." He wouldn't stop walking, as if his body were that timed line wipe that follows you through a video game and kills you when it catches up to you.

As soon as they got outside, the three couldn't stop laughing. Regina had continued to crawl down the main hill of the Paseo, towards her car, where she would probably pass out for the next few hours. They turned to go to their own vehicles to find Molly standing behind them. She looked dramatic, disgusted, and furious, "What the hell was that about?!"

Delaney giggled, "The past presenting itself to three bitter rivals." Hadley and Liv's snickers echoed behind her. Liv declared to the night sky, "Hell hath no fury like three frenemies scornfully cuttin' ties."

"You guys are a bunch of cunts. People do NOT behave this way in Montana." Molly made fists and punched them into the tops of her thighs. She stomped around, "I can't even believe I liked you all. You were so nice. Clearly I didn't see your bad side."

"Clearly," Delaney exclaimed, "I should have left you at the airport. From the moment you stepped off the plane with your wolverine nails all you have done is bitch or brag. I'm sick of it. You can't take the heat and it's only May. No one gives a shit that you're from Montana, where

you live in a cave for a good portion of the year like Yogi the fuckin' Bear."

Delaney moved towards her car, only parked a few spots away, where she unlocked and opened the hatchback. She tossed Molly's bags onto the sidewalk. Molly could only stammer out, "Wh-what are you doing?!"

Hadley and Liv stood watching, stifling their laughter the best they could. Delaney continued to move to the street, where she flagged down a cab that was waiting at the top of the hill. She threw the cabbie a twenty, tossed the bags in the back and turned face Molly, "You have a ticket back. I don't care what you do 'til then, but it won't be with me. Find something about Oklahoma you like or find your own way back to Montana." Molly was put in her place, her mouth gaping, and tears welled up in her eyes before she looked towards the cab and slumped in.

Merrick felt badly about being pregnant, weighing the good, the bad, and the ugly dirt that could come from both possible outcomes repeatedly through her head. Shit brimmed diapers and sleepless nights of cooing and comforting the angry tyke while trying to establish her career seemed bleak in comparison to the original plan she'd envisioned where she could roam freely, only having sleepless nights on her own accord. She often found herself wishing she could go back in time to warn her condom free fucking self of what was to come and avoid the situation entirely. Since this was impossible, as time travel had yet to be invented, Merrick made an appointment to abort the baby.

Hadley volunteered to drive her since no one else knew about the pregnancy. Merrick only confided in Hadley mainly because she felt they had bonded on a dark level that mushroom laced night they confessed their shortcomings to one another. Olivia would normally be the one she would run to but felt betrayed that Liv hadn't told her about Bulgaria and the Peace Corps. Merrick supposed leaving Liv in the dark about the pregnancy seemed to be the best way to even things out between them.

Despite her frustration, Merrick didn't mention the letter about Bulgaria to anyone. There was a reason Liv hadn't been bouncing with joy over the fact that she'd gotten in. *Maybe she doesn't want to go. Maybe she's having second thoughts or hates Bulgaria. What if she's lying and hadn't really graduated?* Possibilities continued to run through her head. Olivia had always shared everything with Merrick the moment it happened. From her period to virginity, Merrick got an Olivia update even if she didn't want to. One night when Liv got drunk and made out with one of Merrick's ex-boyfriends, she instantly searched and found her friend to confess her drunken mishap.

Merrick was only five weeks and three days along, so she would only go in for her ultrasound, blood tests, and lab work before being given the pills that would pull the baby from her womb, erasing it from existence. Breakfast that morning included a banana and a bowl of cereal. While she spooned through the milk for Cheerios she imagined the O's to be like babies she was scooping out of existence. Her appetite disappeared, replaced with nausea, and she pushed the bowl away.

At the Abortion Center in Norman, there was a group of activists standing outside. Merrick had spoken to the woman at the clinic over the phone a few days ago. She smacked

her gum through her soft Southern twang while she warned Merrick, "Now, Ms. Jessup, please know that there may be protestors outside when you arrive. Rest assured they are not allowed within 35 feet of the front door and we have a yellow line displaying the boundary."

Merrick gulped as she listened to her continue, "The best thing to do is to ignore them; it is your body, your life, your decision. We have a guard that greets you when you come in so if you have any problems with the protestors, you just go ahead and let him know. He'll take care of it." She paused, to take what sounded like a swig of cold pop before adding, "He's also gonna ask you and your escort to take out any metal objects and then he'll walk you both through the metal detectors. It's just a precaution we have to take, too many psychotics out there. You got any questions hon?"

Merrick had all kinds of questions about the aftermath but gulped them back down and declined, "No, thank you."

The main parking lot had no spaces left and the protestors were rallied between the extended parking lot and the building. They stood alongside the yellow line and hoisted up signs that read: "Abortion stops a beating heart!" or "Abortion is Murder." Another held an image of a

dead fetus with a cartoon bubble saying, "Mommy, why did you want to kill me?"

Seeing the last one made Merrick's stomach twist into a knot and she began talking, "I was on birth control. I always use condoms. I did everything on my end to make sure this didn't happen and now that it's happened anyways, these people have to make the hardest day of my life even worse?"

"They need to mind their own business," Hadley fumed, "Don't they get that the people that go in there aren't there by choice but situation?" She picked at her nail polish, "Nobody comes here singing about the wonderful abortion they can have so they can go screw like rabbits again; at least I hope no one does that. People come here who have a stillborn and people still get all bent out of shape over it. If any of them say one damn thing I'll go off. Like, what the fuck are they accomplishing by making people feel like shit on an already shitty day."

Merrick kept her hands over her belly, gently drumming around her belly button. She mulled over what it would be like to be a single mother and whether or not she could make it. She figured, *Even if I did, I'd still get shit for being a single mom.* Merrick hated thinking about it and remarked, "Yeah, then they go to church on Sundays and sing

about loving thy neighbor and the golden rule," She thumbed a cigarette burn in Hadley's passenger seat, "It's just hypocritical, yelling at random people without knowing their business. What do they think they are accomplishing?"

"A tan, maybe a date with another ignorant scumbag?" Hadley laughed it off but Merrick was remembering when she was thirteen and stood as a protestor at that exact same yellow line. She didn't want to tell Hadley, she was too embarrassed. Like Liv, she had an upbringing that had an influence on her she hadn't even noticed until she stood there, in a sweatshirt with a stop sign on it, the word 'abortion' below the red octagon. She was there with a select few from her youth group, mainly close-minded tweenagers that loved to pretend they knew about the subjects they talked on about. She had a crush on one of them, a kid named Zane, a sixteen year old with a handsome face and a shiny F150 truck.

A couple had walked by and they yelled things like, "Sinner!," "Don't kill your baby!," and "Murderer!" Zane had started hollering, "Rot in Hell while your baby lives in Heaven!" This caused the husband to come over. He was large, brawny looking man who looked like could tear trees down with his arms alone. His face was as red as his Sooner shirt, "What are you trying to accomplish?"

Zane got up to the yellow line, as close as he could to the man, and told him, "We're trying to send a final message from God before you kill your child."

The man updated Zane, "My child is already dead."

"Yeah, because you're aborting it." Some other girl from church chimed in, she wore a shirt that read, "Jesus saves."

"No," he spit stiffly as he corrected them, "Our kid is severely deformed with a congenital disorder. My baby is already dying and we come to this place so my wife, who you just yelled at, doesn't have to give birth to our stillborn baby."

Merrick was fighting tears as she saw how upset the man was and couldn't even imagine what he was going through, he wanted a baby and had to come here only to be tormented by a bunch of ignorant kids, herself included, "We're sorry," she stammered, "We didn't know."

"Of course not, you're just yelling at random people without knowing what you're doing to them or what they're going through. It's despicable." The guy paced along the yellow line shaking his head as he spoke.

Zane spoke up, looking triumphant as he wrongfully advised, "Your wife will probably commit suicide after she has the abortion. Women can't handle it psychologically."

Merrick was completely horrified. She felt herself becoming aware of the type of people she was with, like someone washed the dirty window she was looking through. The man was doing everything to control his anger at the comment. She shoved Zane, "How can you fucking say that?"

"Stay out of this Merrick and watch your mouth," Zane warned.

Merrick crossed over the yellow line taking her anti-abortion sweatshirt off and threw it on the ground. The husband, now seething, chuckled at Zane, "I guess that's something instilled in you, huh? That women can't handle shit?"

Merrick, now disgusted with herself, joined in with the husband, "People commit suicide for all kinds of reasons. How dare you say his wife is going to kill herself now that they've lost a baby? They're just trying to make it easier for the kid. This shit is despicable. I'm done."

Zane was flushed in the face from the confrontation, "How are you gonna get home? I was going to ask you out."

Merrick laughed at him, "Like I'd wanna go out with the lowest common denominator."

The husband let Merrick call her Aunt Joann, she didn't want her parents to know where she was, and soon

enough, she was on her way home with an entirely new view of the world.

Merrick was brought back to reality by her phone ringing. It was Tommy. She had left him asleep in her bed that morning. When she answered Tommy's voice sounded panicked, "Merr, where are you? I just found the abortion pamphlets. Why didn't you tell me you were pregnant?"

Merrick couldn't find her voice at first, but finally let out, "We can't have a baby, Tom. Its life would suck. We haven't even been dating for two months!"

"I'm pulling into the clinic right now. Where are you? Are you in this extra lot?" Merrick watched Tommy pull into the parking lot and park in the empty spot directly in front of them. He took a deep breath when they locked eyes and released it saying, "Let's talk about this."

Hadley had been putting on her makeup and when she saw Tommy, she said, "Oh, no man, you didn't tell the baby daddy?!" Merrick quickly told Hadley to stay in the car while she talked to him.

She flipped Merrick off, "Like hell I will stay in this car!" She immediately flung the driver side door open, sprung down from her seat and hoisted herself onto the hood of her car, lighting a cigarette as she landed. Tommy was

still in his car staring at Merrick. Once Hadley founded her front row seat, Tommy mouthed, "Are you kidding me?"

Merrick shook her head and mouthed, "No," in response. Her hand clenched the door handle with white knuckles. She couldn't stay in the car but she couldn't make herself get out of it either. The thought of confronting Tommy was terrifying. She thought to herself, *There are two possible outcomes here: Tommy breaks up with me and I have an abortion or Tommy stays with me and I have an abortion. At least either way, I'm having an abortion.* She elbowed the door open and hopped out, meeting Tommy halfway, who mirrored her every move.

Tommy challenged her, "Tell me why we can't have this kid, Merrick."

Merrick drew in a large breath before unleashing, "You're paying child support for four kids you helped create before the year 2000." In the background, Hadley stifled a crack up so violent she had to cough to gain her breath back.

Tommy looked away, rubbing the back of his head, then turned back, "I've never missed a payment and I've never missed a birthday. Even if we didn't work out, I'm the best you could hope for in a baby daddy."

He was right about that. Merrick knew the kid would be provided for. Then she remembered the gut wrenching reason she didn't tell him in the first place, "I don't...*know* that you're the father." His face grew dismal as she went on, "We broke up for a week and I was drunk and fucked a bartender. I don't even know his name."

Merrick had gone out that night with her friends and being sexually frustrated to the point of sensational quivers running through her at random, she walked right up to a bartender, whose slutty reputation she'd already known about. She seductively told him, "I really need to make an appointment." He was putting an order in on the computer when he asked, "For what?" She responded, "To sit on your face. I need to make an appointment to sit on your face *real* bad." The bartender, we'll call him Carl even though she never got his name, sprung a hard on and quickly took our Merrick to the bathroom where Carl locked the door and ate her pussy until kingdom come.

Tommy's eyes were wide as he quickly thought this through and said, "We were working shit out and you didn't even think keep your legs closed. Do you not see us working out?"

Merrick was shocked at how this day was going. She didn't want to lose Tommy. They had only been dating for a

few months so how could she possibly know if they were going to work out or not?! She answered, "How can anyone answer that question? Of course, I fuckin' hope we work out but it doesn't always. Kids need a guaranteed outcome." She didn't really know what she meant by a guaranteed outcome, the adrenaline was causing words to fly out of her mouth without her mind's approval.

"What kid has a guarantee? Show me," Tommy said, "Do you not think I'm father material?"

Merrick had seen Tommy with her two cousins, Jack and Will, when she kept them for a day. He played with them all day, wrestling and chasing them, never too rough, and got them juice when they needed it. He even showed them how to make her dog, Bear, do tricks. Merrick was split between the love she felt for Tommy and the daunting fact that there was a baby inside of her she couldn't wait to get out, "You don't even take spoon sizes seriously."

"What does that have to do with anything?!" He threw his hands out to the sides and started pacing, "You're still mad about that? The silverware goes in the same drawer and the two spoon sizes go right next to each other."

He started making his way up to Merrick from his car, "What is the big fuckin' deal if I don't match them up? I

don't care if they don't match. I don't care if the baby's not mine." He grabbed both of Merrick's hands and stared into her, "You are what I care about. If that kid comes with you then I'm going to be the best chance for a Dad they'll ever have." He brushed the hair from her face with his hand, and got on one knee. "Merrick Lillian Jessup, marry me and give me that chance."

Merrick's heart felt like it was trying to trade places with her stomach. She didn't want to lose Tommy. She didn't really want to give the abortion but would if she had to. If they got married they would have two incomes supporting the baby, but that would mean settling. She still hadn't heard from New Mexico about the internship. She looked to Hadley, who was shaking her head and mouthing the word no. Merrick smiled at her friend and then, turning to Tommy, replied, "Yes."

When Piper and Charlie left from their lunch date, Liv went to the bathroom and out came the beautiful redheaded Jackson from the nutrition party the night before graduation. Olivia was thrilled to see Jackson and she pushed her back into the bathroom and locked the door. The two immediately tore into each other. Jackson yanked Olivia's hair so that her head fell back and she began kissing her neck and collarbone. Jackson's soft skin held the scent of gardenias and Liv couldn't stop smoothing her hands over her body. They were half naked against the bathroom wall when someone started knocking; there was only one bathroom in the tiny restaurant.

The two blew heavy breaths as they tried to calm down, knowing they couldn't continue. "Have dinner with me," Jackson said, "I'm a cook. You like fish?" Liv nodded and was at Jackson's doorstep at 7 P.M. Dinner consisted of tilapia that Liv was a little leary of since it sat out in a Tupperware container for the hour leading up to the actual eating of the fish. One of her two roommates, Juan, joined them for a joint. Jackson lived with Juan and his girlfriend Candice. The dinner was uneventful and Jackson

had to rush off afterwards for a friend's birthday party. Liv was invited but after dinner, her stomach started cramping up so she declined but promised to meet up with her later that night. As soon as Olivia got to The Other Room, she puked the fish she'd eaten and decided to split a pizza with Hadley. After the drunken episode with Regina, Liv blacked out.

The next thing she knew, it was eight in the morning on Friday and she was waking up in a bed with Jackson beside her. She thought she was going to vomit and her phone was going off. It was Merrick, who is never awake before 11 A.M. so Liv saw this as a potential emergency. She snapped her phone to her ear, said hello, and immediately regretted her decision to answer as soon as a high-pitched squeal took over her eardrum. "Fuck, why?" Liv whined. Merrick cheered, "I'm getting married." This made Liv shoot up from the bed, "What?! To who, unicorn gauges?" She didn't even know Merrick was dating anyone.

"No. I haven't told you about him but in short: he's my neighbor, he knocked me up, and I tried to get an abortion, but now we're getting married and I want you to be in it." Liv smacked her forehead and let herself fall back on the bed, Jackson, being a heavy sleeper, never once

stirred. "Pregnant? You didn't tell me?! Congratulations? You want me to be in the wedding? What about New Mexico?!"

Liv had never been more shocked by news in her life. She wanted to strangle Merrick because she felt this was completely uncalled for, the stupidest thing she'd ever heard. They weren't ready to become folks, to carry the strain, at least she wasn't.

"New Mexico can suck it." Merrick snapped angrily, "I haven't even heard anything and I'm pretty sure I'm not getting it. Maybe eventually I'll make my way back there, but now there's so much going on here that I have to stay for now. Maybe Tommy will want to move." *Tommy*. Liv tried to remember meeting or knowing a Tommy yet nothing came to mind. Merrick went on, "You have to meet him soon. We're meeting a justice of the peace at the park in a week. You have to come shopping with me."

Liv finally interjected, "In a week? Why are you in such a rush, isn't that amount of stress going to be too much for the little kumquat?"

Merrick insisted, "I want to be in fifty percent of the wedding pictures, not have my body take up fifty percent of each shot." At this point, Liv realized she had dreaded this day; the day that Merrick got engaged. She knew that Merrick would be one of the most strenuous brides

to wait on and she prayed that Merrick had made one of her cousins the maid of honor. Not that she wouldn't be honored to stand next to her friend, but that she would have to do things, crafty things, girly things, Mr. and Mrs. things, showers upon showers of things that Merrick would want to be done just right. These things were not a few of Liv's favorites.

"You don't wanna be Jupiter on your wedding day? Wait and get married in a year! Boom. You're welcome and by then you'll actually know if you like this guy." Merrick hung up and Liv was glad.

Liv stood again, Jackson had finally stirred, and her red barberry locks were tousled all over her head. Liv had already wrapped her curls into a topknot and had bent over to stretch when Jackson's bedroom door flung open. Liv had never seen the girl with stiff straight bangs before. The girl was pegged, unable to look away from Liv and Jackson, both naked. Jackson leapt from the bed and closed the door on her with, "Give a us a minute." She turned to Liv, "That's my roommate, Candice," then whispered, "she doesn't know I'm a lesbian."

"I thought you said Candice was one of your best friends?" Liv's anxiety cranked when the roommate knocked on the door. "J, hurry up," she muffled through the door.

Jackson turned back and started grabbing socks, "I did. She is."

"How can you live like that?" Liv thought as she threw on her clothes, "Why purposefully put yourself in a situation where you have to hide a huge part of who you are?" She realized she was speaking out loud when Jackson's face fell, followed by her eyes, then hair that covered her tracks. "She doesn't understand," Jackson muttered, "She doesn't let that shit in her house."

Liv was heartsick for Jackson. She couldn't imagine seeing the "ignorant rationality" of throwing out Delaney for being gay. She said, "You know you're that shit, right? If she cares at all then she'll let that shit in her house. I'd hate myself if I did that to my friend."

The disquiet that Liv had watched Delaney endure when she came out to her loved ones was unforgettable even though all of her friends and most of her family accepted her. Delaney had people ask to sit further away from her in restaurants and customers ask for service from a straight waitress. Her Grandpa Joe still didn't know she was gay. Del told Liv would be unable to handle the withheld information in his old age. It was out of respect for his beliefs that she didn't tell him but Liv knew Delaney hated

that he didn't know everything about her; she was his favorite grandchild.

Jackson was still nodding and picking at laundry on the floor when she spoke, "You want to do this again sometime?" Liv knew her answer was no but said "Yeah, I mean, I've got a lot going right now, for instance, I just got asked to be in a wedding in a week so I'll hit you up when I find some time."

Before heading out the bedroom door, Liv thought through her Austin Power's checklist of belongings: *spectacles, testicles* (for which she dangled her keys), *wallet, watch*. She passed the seething Candice, who immediately entered Jackson's room with, "What the fuck was that?" To which, Liv revealed pleasantly to herself, "Just a bitch losin' her lady V card."

During Liv's drive home, she received a phone call from her brother, Ben Grigsby, "Hey! How are you?" Liv said. Ben usually had a clear and distinct voice, softer than their father's yet just as deep so she often got them confused over the phone. He sounded like he'd been running and anything he said was too heavily weighted with breath to decipher. She kept thumbing the volume button on her cell, hoping it was her mistake that his voice settled like jelly. "You okay, Ben?" The longer he remained unclear the

tighter her throat became. He finally said somewhat clearly, "You have to come home."

Liv hadn't been able to make it home to continue the talk of her mother's disapproval that graduation initiated; mainly because she'd been writing so much and partially because when she wasn't writing all she wanted to do was sit at home, veg out, and smoke weed. "What happened?"

Ben let out a deep breath, "Dad was in a car wreck late last night. They found his body this morning." Ben coughed back a sob.

Liv came close to rear-ending a car at a stoplight. She was almost home. One last turn after the light and she'd be back on Robin Hill Road. A lump formed at the front of Liv's throat and warmed to the point of burning as she swallowed tears back. *Almost home. You can let it out once you get home.* She focused on the yellow dashes shooting by her lane. She asked, "Do they know if he...if it was sudden?"

Ben cried, "God, I don't know. When do you think you'll be here?" She could tell he felt panicked. Rob Grigsby was the mortar that held the Grigsby family bricks together, always strong and in control. Now that the mortar was gone, the bricks stood in suspense, waiting for the wind to blow them down. When she answered, her voice

started to crack, "I'm almost home. Ill pack a bag, check my oil and head that way."

Liv ran a packing list through her head to keep her from thinking about the subject: toothbrush, paste, underwear, a notebook, her laptop, a black dress, and black heels. She choked as she pulled onto Robin Hill. Her only pair of black heels were the ones she wore as Regan's maid of honor on her wedding day. It had rained the night before the outdoor ceremony and when Liv tried to walk down the aisle, her heels had sank into the mud and her father didn't waste a second in pulling them out. No one even noticed the delay.

She hung up with Ben as she pulled into the driveway and gripped the steering wheel before releasing a yell so powered with emotion her ribcage shook. When Liv turned the corner to the door, she found Ricky squinting in the bright morning sun that warmed his ungroomed face as he sat on the front steps next to an opened bottle of whiskey. He was dressed in a dinged white t-shirt and cut off denim shorts, crumpled from being slept in the night before. At the sight of him, Liv's devastation turned to anger in a flash and she knew she needed a cigarette or a match.

"I can't talk now, Rick." She unlocked the door and went in but Ricky followed her anyways. *Whatever*, she thought to

herself, and believed it might be better to have him there. Olivia couldn't have been more wrong.

He took a swig from the bottle and finally spoke, "I know everything. I know about the pot field you grow with Ben and Regan. I know about the 'books.' I know about you ditching Franco to make your own money and covering your tracks by writing porn scenes. I'm writing an article on your story for The Gazette and unless you cut me a deal, I'm going to publish your life of a porn writing drug dealer."

Liv waited until he was completely finished, so she had a good footing on what he knew and what he didn't know. By being present at her graduation party it would be possible that Ricky overheard the conversation she had with her siblings about Finley. However, mentally she couldn't imagine where he would have been standing in order to hear them.

It would be impossible for Ricky to know where the field was. The three Grigsbys never talked of its location. It was unspoken information that didn't need discussing since the three knew it so well they could find the field in their sleep. She grew hot and felt sweat beading in her armpits. *Cool down*, she thought to herself, *Act like he*

knows nothing. She didn't look at him when she said, "I don't have time for this."

"Tell that to Dangle." Ricky said in a low grumble. Immediately, Liv whistled for Dangle but only Porkchop and Wheezer, Charlie's pug and poodle ran into Liv's room. She prayed Dangle was outside and faced Ricky, "What did you do to Dangle?"

Ricky smirked now that he'd caught Liv's attention, "Don't worry. He's just taking a vacation while we sort this out." He reached for Liv's arm but she turned to her dresser, hoping to find a pack of matches. The top of her dresser was cluttered with picture frames, a bowl for her rings, a basket she kept her bracelets in, and the deer skull with one antler she'd found walking the land with her father. No matches in sight.

She opened the top drawer to get socks, which knocked a frame down. When she lifted it to set it back in place she saw herself with thick, round glasses at age 8, with Ben and Regan and her father. Rob had just won the chili cook off at the refinery he'd worked at most of Liv's life and held the trophy up high. He'd won every year since, a twenty-year streak. Tears welled in Liv's eyes and fell without a gasp or a whimper. She was overflowing with a range of emotions when Ricky came up behind her and grabbed

her crotch and boob. He whispered, "We can work this out a few ways if you want," before pushing her into the dresser, causing the sock drawer to slam shut on her left hand. Liv screamed.

For the next ten seconds, Liv was no longer Liv, and only saw red. She head butted Ricky back and snatched the deer skull, the antler in line with her thumb. Taking a step back with her right foot she followed with a turn that flung her arm and the antler back and into Rick's skull; an embedded move from years of playing frisbee golf. When she came back to being Liv, Ricky was crumpled at her feet, lying on his left side. His right temple had blood flowing from it and she still held the antler in her hand, which was shaking furiously.

"Fuck!" She screamed. She immediately grabbed a t-shirt and held it to his head in one hand. When she looked up, she saw Hadley, washed-out and trembling against the doorway in her underwear and a t-shirt. Hadley finally spurted, "I heard the whole thing."

"I didn't even know you were here!" Adrenaline still pumped through Liv and she couldn't stop fidgeting. Hadley came and kneeled next to her, grabbing a towel from the floor and slid it under Ricky's head. She asked, "Liv, what are we going to do?" Liv couldn't take her eyes off his

chest until she saw he was still breathing. *Thank God*, she thought, *God. Dad. Fuck.*

Liv had always believed that when you die, you become all knowing. You know everything about everyone in your life, what they've done and what they will do. After her Memaw died, Liv would apologize ritually to her great grandmother anytime she would use God's name in vain; it had upset Memaw so many times while she was alive. Now that her dad was dead, she realized that he must know everything. *The porn, the pot, and now this.* "I'm sorry, Dad." This final thought she said out loud with tears streaming down her cheeks.

Concerned, Hadley tilted her head and rubbed Liv's back, shushing and comforting Liv to the point of release. Liv felt a deep-seated pain she'd never encountered, rooting in her as though the antlers had smashed into her heart, scattering the pieces like glass splinters through her lungs, her gut, her mind, everywhere. Sobs burst from her to the point that she had to gasp for breath. None of Liv's friends had ever seen her cry with the exception of her break up with Franco, even then she had only shed silent tears while they smoked cigarettes. She finally spurted out, "Ben called. Dad's dead. Fucking car accident."

Hadley said, "Hold on, hold that t-shirt to his head." In a moment she returned with the latter half of a blunt. "Hit this, calm down. I'm so sorry."

Liv hit the stick and laughed through her smokey tears, "I'm sorry! Ricky picked a really bad day to pull this shit. I got so angry." Right away, the pot was quieting Liv's mind. Her tiny heaves grew into regular breaths and her emotions, while still there, were put at a distance as if the high had wrapped her in a blanket of protective warmth.

Hadley gravely nodded, "I know. I was watching around the corner when he pushed that drawer on your hand. I don't think I've ever seen you move that fast."

Liv stared at Ricky's bleeding head, "He needs an ambulance. They're going to think I tried to kill him or something! What if he presses charges?!" Hearing herself say these things allowed the overflow of thoughts and emotions to once again flood her mind. She drew in a heavier hit and as she blew out the smoke, she felt the relief return.

"I have an idea." Hadley stood up, "Stand up, Livvy." Liv did as she was told. Hadley handed her the bloody skull, "You're going to pack up all the weed and paraphernalia, take it to my house, and go home. You never

came here this morning. I texted Ricky last night and broke up with him. This works out for us because we'll make it the reason he showed up here. Choke me out with these antlers and then hit me a couple times, we'll have ourselves a self-defense case."

Liv was processing what Hadley was telling her, she sniffed back tears and wiped her eyes, "Dude, I don't know. Are you sure about this?"

"Positive." Hadley said, "I'll say he threatened to kill Dangle, wherever he is, and I was scared of what he was capable of. We have to work fast. Now, hit me, damn it."

Charlie had gained vision back in one eye from the skeet shot incident, but both were severely bloodshot and swollen, the worst one puffed out to the size of a small kiwi. Charlie checked herself out in Larry the cameraman's passenger flip down mirror, "Well, at least I don't need to look good to get people off over the phone." She flipped the mirror back up and studied Larry while he maneuvered through the 10 and 2 Oklahoma drivers that flooded the five o'clock Edmond traffic. He looked like he was attractive once but had smoked enough meth over the years to leave scab scars in places and thin his cheeks to the bone. They weren't far from her house, which Charlie had just entered into Larry's GPS. He noticed her eyeing him and said, "You know we've met before, right?"

Charlie immediately realized that Lindsey, a little shit of a four-year old who loved to terrorize Hadley and Charlie at Chigger Sitters, undoubtedly from the lack of attention she received at home, belonged to Larry. Five months before the fire, they had to have a meeting with Lindsey's parents in regards to her behavior. Lindsey had wiped her butt with eleven Q-tips she'd found under the

bathroom sink and left them lined along the edge of the counter.

Larry didn't see what the big deal was, "As long as she's keepin' the pooper clean, who cares how she does it?"

"Ah, yes, Mr. Boon. I hadn't been able to place you until now. How is Lindsey?" Charlie was pleased she'd been so rough with Larry until he answered.

"She's terrorizin' my wife at home now that Chigger Sitters burnt down. That was the only daycare we could afford in Edmond." Edmond was known for being full of unreasonably overpriced businesses with mediocre services. Charlie had opened Chigger Sitters hoping to provide care for the kids whose parents lived in the real world of paychecks and poverty.

"Yeah, it was completely unexpected. They're still investigating the arson theory but I don't even know who would give a shit that much to burn down a day care of all things." Charlie knew she shouldn't go any further, the cops had told her to keep her mouth shut about the investigation, but she'd already said enough for Larry.

He pulled up to the house, the GPS rang in to confirm they had arrived at the correct residence. He turned and offered, "I'm gonna make you a deal, Ms. Tripp. I've got the finale footage you ruined, cum shot and all. If you

don't give me a chunk of that investment settlement when it comes through, I will make sure it ends up on YouTube with credits to your name." He smiled, the missing tooth exposed, and Charlie smiled back, "Mr. Boon, why don't we go inside and discuss this further over some whiskey? I'm sure we can work something out."

Although Charlie seemed collected she was speedily thinking of possible ways to handle this situation. She knew she had a Xanax bar and three Ambien in her purse. Larry agreed and excused himself to the bathroom as soon as they entered. *Perfect*, she thought. She immediately dug out the drugs, went to the kitchen, and began mashing the pills with the kitchen axe that clung to the magnetic strip over the stove.

The walls of the house were hairline thin and Charlie was thankful to be able to hear Larry shitting and shirting in the bathroom. She swept up the powder with a receipt left on the counter and poured it into the bottom of one of two glasses. Charlie got on her tippy toes and grabbed the whiskey bottle from the top of the fridge. She slung the icebox open to snag a 2-liter of coke and ice. Charlie tossed the cubes in first and sloshed them around, hoping to start the powder absorption process and then, hearing the toilet flush, quickly threw in half a glass worth of

whiskey in each, topping them off with coke. She stirred the drinks just in time to hear Larry open the door and grabbed the two-liter to toss a bit more fizz into the drink so it looked as though she had just finished pouring the concoctions.

Larry took a big swig of the glass Charlie handed him and she followed suit, "Do you smoke pot, Larry?" He grinned big, "Who doesn't?"

When Larry woke up, his head ached, he could smell peanut butter, and there was an odd pain in his dick he'd never felt before. He was naked and tied to a cold metal folding chair. The room was dark with no windows and his bare feet stung from the cold cement floor where they were planted. His mouth was gagged and when he tried to stand his nuts were caught on something that sent streaks of fire into his gut, making him feel as though he'd been hit with a bat to the stomach. He tried to yell but all that came out were muffled groans. He thought he should be able to scoot the chair or carry it with him but something was attached to the back of the chair that weighed it down.

Larry heard a door open but couldn't see any light. This was because he was blindfolded until Charlie removed her sleep mask from his face. She shone a flashlight in his face and asked, "Think it's cool to blackmail people,

Larry? 'Cause this is what happens when you fuck with me." She slammed the flashlight into the side of his face and pulled up pictures on her phone.

After Larry passed out, Charlie stood over him trying to think of a way to make the situation go away. *I can't kill him*, she thought. Her pug, Porkchop, had walked up to Larry and started licking his face. A Grinch's smile crept over Charlie's face, *But I can 1-up him*. Charlie dragged his body into her bedroom along with a pair of gloves, a spoon, a jar of peanut butter and her two dogs, Porkchop and Wheezer.

Charlie proceeded to undress Larry and put him into various sex positions. Each time she would spoon out a dollop of peanut butter and spread it on areas of Larry that would create what looked like bestiality: a nipple, his schlong, a butt cheek, even his lips. She taped his eyes open with tiny slits of tape and eyelash glue. She dressed her dogs in various outfits, they each had doggie costume closet. That night they were a nurse and a doctor.

Charlie knew that the two couldn't resist peanut butter but was so worried about Karma biting her in the ass. To be able to say she hadn't submitted her babies to prostitution, she put enough peanut butter on Larry so that they wouldn't get to the skin and removed the dogs from the

situation as soon as she got her shot. This is why Larry smelled peanut butter when he woke up. He had sticky patches of it drying all over him. Charlie had succeeded in keeping her dog's licks away from Larry himself. She became even more cautious when she thought about diseases, except for when Wheezer, the poodle, nipped Larry's dick as Charlie pulled her away from him.

After she took the naughty doggy pictures, Charlie dragged Larry to the garage. She dug out a metal folding chair from the clutter, covered in cobweb, and tied his ankles, elbows and hands to it. A bowling ball was what she wedged into the back legs, denting the rim of the seat. To finish it off, she gagged him with a bandana and blinded him with her aviator print sleep mask before spraying adhesive on the seat and Larry's ballsack and sticking the two together.

Then, she continued her plan and searched Larry's pockets and car. She found a flash drive in the console of his Spectra amongst burger wrappers and receipts. The flash drive held the footage of the semen scene, which Charlie instantly emailed to herself before deleting the entire thing from the "Cum Shot" folder.

Charlie held the phone to Larry's eyes, "You see these photos? I wonder what child and animal services would say

about this shit." Charlie laughed and said, "I found your flash drive too. You can say goodbye to that though, it's destroyed."

Larry's face grew red and he started screaming through the gag while shaking his head. Charlie continued, "You wanted to come in here and get a handout. I'm gonna give you a hand out the door. We got a deal?" Larry sat still for a moment. Finally, he slowly nodded his head yes. Upon seeing this Charlie smirked, "What a good pup," and turned out the flashlight.

Charlie had knocked Larry out again in a chokehold. She felt stronger than Britney Spears as she hoisted Larry into the shopping car she'd stolen from Wal-Mart and painted pink. It was dark when she stepped outside and couldn't see any neighbors. She rolled him straight to the back seat of his car.

She was driving down the highway in Larry's truck when a cop pulled her over. Liv's voice ran through her head, *What does this look like? Think naive, nothing's shady here.* One thing she'd learned from living with Liv was that you could make most sketchy situations appear innocent, you just had to find the right explanation for the scenario and Charlie was just taking a good friend home, a drunk naked friend. She settled on the sweet girlfriend taking her

drunk boyfriend home before the cop asked for her license and insurance.

Larry had let his tags expire and Charlie reassured the cop she would let him have it first thing in the morning, with Larry snoring in the backseat, and he let her go. She drove him to downtown Oklahoma City, cleared his GPS history and left him naked, sleeping in the back seat of his truck at the corner of Broadway and Robert S. Kerr. She locked him in keys and all, and dialed Liv, "Hey, can you come get me? I'm downtown."

"I mean, yeah, but why? Where are you downtown? Everything's closed." Delaney had just hopped in her car with Hadley and Liv and were leaving The Other Room. Her joy from the Regina encounter that resulted in throwing Molly to the wind was gone the moment she heard the frailty in Charlie's voice. She was concerned about Charlie, especially since she didn't know what she meant by not wanting Liv to know she had a bad day. After Charlie told her which street corner she was at, Delaney told her, "Liv and Hadley are with me in the Paseo. We'll be there in ten minutes."

When the drunken three pulled up, Charlie was leaning against a light pole. Liv rolled down the window and hollered, "Hey, Tess Tickle, have we got a story for you!" She jerked her head back in the window when she saw Charlie's face, "What the fuck is up with your eyes?" To which, Charlie blandly replied, "Yeah, yeah, same here. You guys are toasted. I don't want to hear it. Give me the keys, I haven't been drinking."

Delaney sat in the front passenger seat and watched Charlie closely. She looked like she'd been in a fight. One

eye stuck out, almost closed shut from the swelling. The other was so bloodshot, Delaney would have bet she had pink eye. Liv and Hadley went on about Regina and Molly and what went down in The Other Room. Suddenly, a swerve in some road construction caused the contents of Delaney's stomach to shoot to the back of her throat. She swallowed and said, "I'm gonna puke."

Charlie's head snapped towards Delaney's direction, "Wait. I'll pull over!" Charlie's sudden lane change only made matters worse and Delaney saw no other choice but to dump the contents of her purse onto the floorboard and heave the drinks from earlier into it. Liv and Hadley were appalled and yelled, "Ugh," "Gross," and "Sick man!" After a few more vomits, Delaney lifted her head to see blue and red lights flashing everywhere. Charlie whined, "Fuck. I'm not even drunk and this is the second time tonight."

The Edmond cop walked up to the window. He was tall and lanky, his last name, HENRY, glistened against the flashing lights. Delaney watched him lower his head to the window. He sarcastically said, "Are you wasted or do you always whip off the road like that? Whoa, what's wrong with your eyes?" His nose crumpled when he smelled the vomit and made eye contact with Delaney. "Sick," he said.

"Yeah, she said she was going to puke so I pulled over real quick but the vomit came quicker." Charlie told him, "She puked in her purse. I have pink eye and am driving these drunks home." Charlie kind of giggled. The cop shined his light in Delaney's face and without thinking she shouted, "Fuck. Really, man?"

He didn't remove the light from her eyes, "You better watch your mouth, ma'am." He turned his light towards the back seat and inspected Liv and Hadley before saying, "I'm gonna need all of your licenses, but if sickly's over here is covered in puke I don't want it." The four gave him their identification and he went back to the car. Delaney realized out loud, "He didn't even take my insurance card."

Liv inquired, "Does anyone have drugs on them? Cause we'll need to shove them up somebody's body cavity before he gets back." Luckily, they didn't have anything but a Vyvanse, which Charlie had a prescription for. Charlie looked over her shoulder and whispered, "I don't really have pink eye for the record. I'll explain later." In what seemed like no time, the cop came back and eagerly shot his head in the car window, "Olivia Grigsby?"

"That's me." Liv answered. Upon this question, Delaney had a rush of worry come over her and she thought she might puke again. Cops hated Liv and Liv hated cops. *She would be*

drunk, Delaney crossed her fingers as she feared the worst, *Please don't get mouthy, Liv. You'll get us all arrested.* She hoped it would all end soon but the cop gleefully asserted, "I need you to step out of the car ma'am."

Delaney looked back at Liv, who appeared calm and coolly replied, "I'm sorry sir I won't do that. The second I step out of this car, you can arrest me for public intoxication. If you need anything from me you may ask me through the window."

The cop's face changed from hopeful to annoyed and said, "Ma'am, I just need to ask you a few questions." Delaney cringed at the thought of ending up in jail for the second time this year. Liv smiled and said, "Well, go ahead, ask me."

The cop's eyes narrowed and he glared at her through the window. Delaney noticed he had a cut across his left temple that disappeared into a forehead wrinkle. He asked, "We've had reports of drug dealing in the neighborhood of Robin Hill. Just wanted to know if you'd seen anything."

Why didn't he ask Charlie and me to step out of the car? Delaney thought to herself. All three of their licenses had the same address on them. She glanced over at Charlie, whose eyes were vast and fixed on the steering wheel. *Did he even look at ours?* Something told her no.

Liv appeared to try and recall any information before reporting, "I haven't sir, although there's a cow in somebody's backyard off Willow Ridge and it's keeping me up late at night. So if you could do something about that, it would be so very kind of you." Liv had switched on what she called her Southern comfort voice. It was part of her innocent gimmick she used anytime she talked to an authoritative figure and it always made Delaney smile when she heard it.

"A cow, huh?" The cop jeered back, "We'll get right on it." He rapped his fingers along the driver door before handing their identifications back to Charlie and sarcastically saying, "Drive safe ladies, have a nice night."

The four watched the cop all the way back to his car before turning to each other. Delaney pointed out, "They're onto ya Livvy. Better get the goods out of the house."

When Delaney woke up the next morning her head was still spinning. She ran her fingers through her hair and found a blunt tucked behind her ear. "Thank you, Jesus," she whispered, pulling a lighter out of her pocket and sparking the stick; she'd slept in all of her clothes from the night before. After she hit the blunt, another hand emerged from underneath the yellow tie-dye comforter with

pink painted fingernails, followed by a mess of blonde hair with deep blue eyes peering through bangs.

"Good morning, Lana." Delaney greeted, "Wanna hit this?" Delaney was ecstatic that Lana had come over for a smoke session after the bar. Charlie had passed out and Liv went to Jackson's so Delaney finally had Lana all to herself. The two stayed up toking on bowl after bowl, drinking and watching Law and Order.

Lana sleepily nodded her head and began smoking the reefer. She turned the blunt backwards so that the lit end would be in her own mouth and blew the smoke into Delaney's mouth. When she finished she asked, "What do you plan to do today, Del?"

Finally, the day arrived that OUT would open and Delaney's mural would be exposed to the nightlife of Oklahoma City. Delaney was nervous but ready to see what reactions her work would evoke. All that was left was to throw on a protective coat that would dry by the time the bouncers started checking ids. The two had decided they would grab breakfast and that Lana would go with Delaney to see the mural when a clad crumpled Hadley appeared at the end of the bed; she'd slept on a pillow pile in the floor and had just woke up. Hadley demanded, "Give me that weed.

She snatched the Mary Jane from Lana's hand. This made Delaney snap at her, "Jeez. Take her arm off too why don't ya?" Hadley shrugged and continued to toke the blunt to its end. Delaney asked her, "We're goin' to breakfast and then up to OUT. Wanna come?" Hadley shook her head, "Nope. I'm gonna take over your bed though." She leapt under the comforter as they got up and soon she was barely visible under the covers.

Delaney and Lana drove off in the clothes they'd worn yesterday, stopping at Daylight Donuts to avoid the breakfast rush. When they'd finally pulled up to OUT, Delaney wasn't surprised to be the only one there but notice the front door was left opened an inch. As the two approached, Lana said, "There's an awful lot of paint cans in the lot." Delaney had yet to notice but Lana was right. There were half a dozen cans tumbling around the lot. *The mural*, she panicked and sprinted for the door. When she turned the lights on, her worst fears had come true. Black and purple graffiti was thrown up like chicken scratch labeling the three couples: faggot, sexy, and dyke. An additional comment was written below next to an stick figure couple of two, Lana read it aloud, "You forgot the trannies."

Delaney threw an empty paint can across the glittering dance floor. Only the mural had been tagged. She let out a growl that grew into a scream and left goose bumps on Lana's arms. "A transgender could be anyone." Delaney said, "It could be the 'straight' couple or any of them. Sex lies amid the legs, gender stays amidst the ears." Del wondered, *When are people going to stop being idiots?*

Lana chuckled, "It's probably some high schooler that can't even grasp their own sexuality. Tell me what to do. Let's fix it." The two began to paint over the scribbled graffiti. The clock was ticking toward the opening at 8 P.M. Lucky for them it was only nine in the morning.

By the time OUT's club doors opened, the two had covered the vandalization, thrown on a clear coat and showered. The place was booming Lady Gaga when the two returned with a line thirty homies deep. Mickey was outside smoking a cigarette and led them right in, gushing, "Total hit ladies! Everything is on me. Del I've got a lot of people who want to meet you."

In full swing the club transformed into a dreamland. The dancers wore leaves that barely covered their play parts. They tossed the grapes, which were purple beach balls, back and forth and into the crowd as they showered in the wine dyed water. The club was flooded with couples

of every kind, celebrating together under a roof built on acceptance.

Del shouted to Lana, "This is the most beautiful thing I've ever witnessed in Oklahoma." Lana grinned and said, "I'm buying the artist her first drink." She winked as she walked away and left Delaney to follow Mickey. Delaney had on a sleek, black pant dress with an open back that exposed her side tattoo, a saluting pin up girl, dressed in air force garb. Her hair furred forward and up, revealing her bright blue eyes, dusted with eye shadow. Mickey Redd immediately began introducing her to many of his friends and business partners. She told and retold the story of the break in and how her beautiful date had helped save the day as they scrambled under pressure.

Lana approached with two drinks in her off the shoulder violet glitter dress. She carried an air of elegance as she introduced herself, her milky voice melting the hearts of the well to do and in the know suit and ties of Oklahoma City. They were talking to a Mr. Waldon, a merciless gay banker whose smile only dug so far into his tightly botoxed face. He was discussing with Delaney a potential mural he wanted done in the foyer of his home.

Delaney squeezed Lana's hand as Mr. Waldon went on about the art deco that adorned his home but felt someone's

eyes on her. She glanced up and saw Molly, walking straight for her. Lana followed Delaney's temporary stare to see Molly. They'd never met, but Lana recognized her from creeping on Facebook. Molly stopped and stood there peevishly scanning the crowd, checking back on the two every two seconds. Lana wondered if Molly had been last night's vandal. She smiled at Mr. Waldon and excused herself, leaning in to Delaney to whisper, "Keep going. I'll take care of it."

Lana's first thought was to find Mickey but she didn't want to lose sight of Molly, nor allow her to approach Delaney. She decided to start in on Molly and noticed two security guards coming up from the doorway, with Mickey Redd walking behind them. They had Molly by both arms by the time Lana and Mickey had reached her. Molly tried to jerk away from the two large muscle milk addicts and spit at Mickey, "Tell Del I hope she liked my message on her wall."

Lana smirked and dumped her drink on Molly's head, "Oops," she said, "Guess that's what happens when you send messages of hate."

Mickey Redd grinned wide, "Okay boys, watch her nails! Hold the illuminati idiot and call the cops. We've caught our vandal. Hope you choke on your martini honey."

Saturday, June 22, 2013. After Merrick agreed to marry Tommy, her world shot into a fast forward motion. They had to meet one another's parents, siblings, immediate family, and extended family. Then they had to tell them about the baby. Merrick went straight to an obstetrician to check the baby after deciding to keep it, she was especially worried about the mushrooms she'd eaten. To their relief, the baby was strong and health.

Tommy's parents and three lip bitingly attractive brothers, also carpenters, cried at the joyful news of a new family member. Merrick's father, Bruce, seemed to triple in size and red coloring as he yelled but Emily Jessup grew a smile wider than Merrick had ever seen before, "I want to be called Gam Gam and we'll call Bruce Pop Pop." Emily ran to the Tommy and gave him a squeeze, "Welcome to the family Tom Tom."

In addition to the family obstacles, she had never been asked so many questions before and strangers began to jump in once the ring was put on her finger. Even all of her usual hauntings: the cafe down the street from her apartment, the liquor store/gas station combo, as well as

the dog park had strangers asking about her life progress: "Where are you going to live?," "How many kids do you want?," "Does he leave the toilet standing up?," and "When's the big day?"

Merrick wasn't the type of person to put her business on Front Street and share it with the world so this prodding of the public had her at wits end. It didn't take long before Merrick didn't want to go anywhere because she didn't want to converse with anyone about anything regarding the wedding and feared she might snap at a kind stranger. "Good thing I'm getting married in a week," Merrick vented to Charlie over the phone, "This engagement period is a bunch of annoying bullshit."

They had kept it simple, an 8 o' clock ceremony and reception on her parents' ranch with the sun setting behind their vows. Close friends and family joined them in the celebration. Their loved ones were the main reason they held it on the ranch, this way anyone could pass out wherever they liked and nobody drove home drunk. Merrick's bridesmaids consisted of Hadley, Charlie, Delaney and Liv as the maid of honor. Tommy enlisted Merrick's brother Don and his own three brothers: Jim, Curt, and Bill to serve as the groomsmen.

Merrick looked through her parent's kitchen window, watching the cowboy hats and up do's arranging themselves on the wooden benches Tommy's brothers had built for them. She drew in a large breath and let it flare out her nose. Nausea swept over her and she ran to bathroom, terrified she'd puke all over her wedding dress.

Merrick tore the bathroom door open to find Charlie hoisted onto the counter, heels up, with Tommy's youngest brother, Jim, who was mid moan deep inside her, his sculpted ass facing Merrick. "Charlie!" Merrick yelled, "I have to puke." Charlie kicked off the groomsman and shoved him out the door, pants down. "Thanks!" she shouted. She grabbed a towel and held it over Merrick's dress while she stared into the porcelain throne water. Charlie apologized, "Sorry about the naked thrusting when you're trying to puke. Why are you trying to puke again?"

Merrick held her hand up to Charlie and tried to focus on the nausea. If she focused on the nausea, she could puke and the sooner she could get out of this bathroom, the sooner she could walk down the aisle. She spit into the toilet bowl of water, "The women in my family are known to always have morning sickness except it's more like all day long sickness and I'm nervous on top of it all so that just makes it worse." She spit again, *Come on puke, Get out of*

my belly for Chrissakes. She had hardly eaten anything but jerky and donuts in the past day because she was terrified the baby bump would make its debut down the aisle.

They heard the bridal procession begin and Merrick started trembling. Charlie turned to Merrick and cheered, "The Canon is calling! Knock it up or lock it up Merri Lill!" before rushing out of the bathroom to get in the procession line. Merrick looked in the bathroom mirror and psyched herself up, "You're already knocked up, Merrick, what's the worst that can happen here? You are going to be fine. Everything is going to be fine. You've never looked more fuckin' beautiful in your life and everyone that loves you is out there waiting for you." She stood tall and smiled at herself before declaring, "This is the last you'll see of single Ms. Jessup."

When she stepped out of the room she saw Liv down the hall. She was about to step out of the house, her arm looped with Tommy's oldest brother, Bob. Liv looked back at her just before she moved out of sight and winked one of her puffy eyes.

Merrick's heart slumped with her head as she thought of Liv at her father's funeral three days prior. The day was humid and blanketed with a dark overcast. Everyone expected that the sky would've poured at any moment. She

sat with Hadley, Charlie, and Delaney behind the empty red pew where the family would sit. When they came out, Liv and Ben led the way, with Regan and Finley escorting Quinn to the pew. Both Liv and Ben Grigsby conducted themselves as stoic but when Merrick caught Liv's eye, she saw the threat of a tearful outburst looming over her like the storm above and felt Liv's sorrow in her gut.

Liv held in her hands the old football Rob Grigsby had taught the game to his children with. She and Ben walked up to the open casket. Merrick watched Liv's body shake as she took a deep breath and tucked the football under her father's rough and weathered hands. Ben carried a black ski mask and placed it in the coffin next to Rob. After locking his arms around his sister for a moment, he proceeded to the platform for the eulogy. He opened with, "Don't be alarmed by the ski mask I just placed in the coffin. My father wasn't a burglar on the sneak if that's what you're thinking." The group of mourners chuckled as Ben continued. "When he played flag football in college, he wore it every game while growling at his competition and acquired the nickname Troll as a result. Little did anyone know that Troll would be the greatest father of all time."

Ben's eulogy was full of funny and touching stories that caused everyone to laugh through their tears. Rob

Grigsby was still an active member of the army when he died and as they lowered his coffin into the grave, he was sent off with three rifle volleys being fired. The rain didn't begin to pour until the Grigbys' had gone home.

"Merri Lil, you ready to get hitched sugar?" Merrick's father, Bruce, put his hand on her shoulder. A couple of tears had filled her eyes when she looked at him and he caught them with a handkerchief. "It's a good thing your momma stuffed that kerchief in my pocket!" He held her, "Livvy's gonna be fine. You're gonna be fine. While things seem huge and overwhelming now, they end up being very small ditches in the vast canyon your life digs." Merrick couldn't have hugged her dad any harder. Merrick mumbled, "It's not fair that Rob doesn't get to walk his girls down the aisle."

At the funeral, Merrick watched her father stop Liv's Uncle Scott from approaching the Grigsbys, he was known for being dramatic and stupid, especially to Liv, who was anything but what a lady should be. Uncle Scott shoved Bruce, "She needs to know that it's her fault he never saw any of his girls off." Bruce grabbed him by the shoulder and paralyzed him in the tight grip. Bruce quietly said to him, "She flies whichever way the wind blows and you better

get over it. Have some respect and deal with your brother's death another way."

Merrick had been so proud of Bruce that day and she squeezed him tight. He kissed the top of her head and, arm in arm, they began the march together. As soon as Merrick saw Tommy smiling, the fear melted away and all she felt were butterflies.

At the reception, Merrick was on an all-time high. Everything was going smoothly and she'd felt she could accomplish anything. She sat at the candle lit wedding party table, a long, lavender and burlap clothed picnic table that overlooked the reception, and found herself alone next to Liv. The two hadn't talked much other than business regarding the wedding and funeral. Liv complimented the Jessups, "Your parents did a great job decorating the place. It's like a different world."

Merrick didn't think before she spoke, the anxiety had taken over, "When were you going to tell me about Bulgaria?" The moment she released the question, she knew it was a bad time. Liv's face showed a mixture of surprise and queasiness. She poked at her chicken dish before answering, "I didn't know what I was going to do when I got the letter. I wasn't sure if I still wanted to go."

Merrick felt her skin flushing with annoyance, "You mean to tell me you worked your ass off for a year to get this experience and now you're not taking it?"

Liv stabbed her chicken as she sassed, "What about the internship in New Mexico, Merri Lil? What about moving away to a new place you can find yourself in? Am I allowed to change my mind or do the looney bin decisions only apply to you?"

Merrick felt if she were a cartoon, steam would be shooting out of her ears. She slung back the last of the water in her glass, "You were planning on jetting without telling anyone. Admit it. It's not unlike you, Liv. It's just the only way you know how to end things. Maybe leave a letter, or send a text after your gone, saying you're sorry? What was your plan exactly?"

Liv scooted to the edge of the bench, "You think I'd move halfway across the world after my fucking father died? After all this shit that's happened you want to be concerned with Bulgaria?! What's really the matter here? Are you mad that I got a way out and you didn't and now that you've decided to make the best of an already bad situation you think you can judge me on mine?" Olivia realized her voice was getting too loud and that she was now standing. She sat quickly and quietly finished with,

"Your pregnant and delusional and none of that is my fault so stop judging me."

Merrick stood, picked up the excess of her white dress and quickly made her way through the tables to the barn, ignoring any friendly acknowledgments as she passed by. The barn had always been a means of escape in the suffocating times of her childhood. When she swung the wooden door open, she found Charlie, wearing a cowboy hat with hay in her dress, riding Tommy's other brother, Bill, who was spread out on a haystack, wearing only his boots.

"Charlie!," Merrick yelled as she grabbed a pitchfork and moved towards them, "Get out before I pitch you! I wanna see elbows and assholes!" As the two threw their clothes on Bill joked, "Didn't know you'd be such a pitchy bride, Merrick." He winked at her and Charlie cracked up laughing. Merrick shot a look of fire at Bill and the two ran off giggling.

Merrick paced back and forth through the barn talking to herself. "Pregnant and delusional my ass. She's the one who's blowing it. She's the one who needs to leave Neverland and grow up. Fuckin' ridiculous!" She sat down and stewed on a haystack, "I can't believe I said she'd bail on everyone. She wouldn't do that even if all was well."

Tommy came looking for her. "Hey Mrs. Pickens, you wanna come back with me and I'll romantically stuff some cake in your face?" He wrapped his arms around her and she blew out a large sigh. "Yes. I would love that." Tommy picked her up and carried her back to the soiree where they were greeted with applause, whistles, and shouts of joy.

All the toasts were given except for the maid of honor's. Liv stood with her champagne glass held close to her chest. Merrick could see the trouble Liv was having as she tried to calm the emotional storm underneath her cool exterior. Liv swallowed it back and sealed it with a smile, "To me, marriage is a fairy tale. It's a Disney dream we grow up with, the model usually being supplied to us by our parents."

Liv cleared her throat before continuing, "Now the model is also supplied to me by Merrick and Tommy. They found themselves right next door to one another and fell in love almost instantly." Liv turned to Tommy and Merrick, "Merrick didn't tell me right away because she knew I'd tell her she was crazy. But love is crazy isn't it?" She was met with nodding heads, Merrick's included.

Liv continued, "My best friend, Mrs. Merrick Pickens, has the found the modern fairy tale and no one deserves it more than she does because she genuinely knows how to love,

how to dream, and how to believe." She raised her glass, "People that carry that love and hope with them are few and far between. I am honored to be standing next to them. Here's to a lifetime full of love and a dream come true. Cheers." She downed her glass and hugged Merrick hard whispering, "I'm so sorry. You're not pregnant and delusional."

Merrick felt tears stinging her eyes and sniffed them back as she said, "I'm sorry. You would never bail on us like that. I don't know why I said it. I'm so glad you're here." Merrick pulled away to look at her friend's tear soaked face. She couldn't believe that such a distance had formed between them over the last month. Merrick brushed a curl out of Liv's eye and took her glass, "Let's get you some more champagne."

When the two walked over to the champagne table Merrick notice a boot sticking out from under the tablecloth. She raised it to find that it belonged to Tommy's brother, Curt, who was getting head under the table from Charlie. The two stopped to look up at she and Liv.

Charlie smiled, "Sorry Merrick, I can't help myself." Merrick rolled her eyes and said, "Congratulations on your accomplishments today, Char. Curt, your boot is sticking out." She dropped the tablecloth on the blowjob and turned

to Liv, who had the cheesiest grin on her face. Merrick pointed at the table and whispered angrily, "I have walked in and had to stop her screwin' around with every one of Tommy's brothers today."

Liv asked, "Why didn't you stop that time?" Merrick smirked, "Well I was going to but, fuck it. Char's got dreams too." The two laughed throughout the rest of the night.

After her father's funeral, Liv shrunk within herself. She no longer felt safe. The security of an existing father, who could possibly come out of nowhere at her life's most desperate moment to save the day, was gone. Liv thought of fathers as the figures prince charmings are written after; an ideological model for the hierarchy home. Nowadays, Liv found this mythological creature of perfection was seldom to be found, mainly because most fathers lose their color once they pass down their youth to the progeny and therefore cannot be recognized by their desiccated appetite. In the days Liv knew him, Rob Grigsby was constantly ravenous, his face never paled and he always had something to laugh about.

It was the Monday after Merrick's wedding. For the honeymoon, Merrick and Tommy Pickens went to stay in the Jessup family cabin in New Mexico for a week. A hung over sendoff of family and friends watched the shoe polished Honda Civic drive off, scattering blown up condoms all along Highway 70.

Once Liv had gotten to know Tommy in the drunken stupor that usually brings future friends together, she was

happy for Merrick. He drank whiskey, loved dogs, couldn't wait to be a Dad (even if it was for the fifth time), and had a relentless craving for carpentry that inspired her to dig deeper in her own writing.

Liv sank into one of the two timeworn copper leather couches of the Grigsby living room. She wrote while she waited for her father's attorney, Myles Beeker, to finish organizing his paperwork on the large square coffee table that sat between the two facing couches. Myles would be going over Rob's will with the family momentarily.

The rest of the family loitered in the connected kitchen, occasionally looking over their coffee cups to see if Myles was ready. They never took to Myles like Liv and her father had, probably because his children were terrors and the three other Grigsbys blamed the kids' antics on Myles. *You can't help it if your kids are shits from the get go*, Liv thought. Myles looked through his square metal glasses at Olivia, "What are you writing there, Livvy Jean?"

Liv looked up at Myles, his face had fallen under gravity's weight and the bags of his eyes had begun to droop out from his glasses and over his cheekbones since she'd last seen him at her father's birthday party that spring. "It's just a haiku."

Myles tapped his heels on the wood flooring, "Can I hear it?" He pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose and Liv grew uncomfortable as he peered at her, his purple veins thoroughly visible in his eyelids.

Liv considered it as she read over what she'd scribbled:

Tree Talk

A tree says to me,
I am a root in the ground
sticking my neck out.

She closed the notebook and declined, "Nah, It's not finished," and cleared her throat, "We ready?"

Myles forfeited his seat and the family spread across the couches. Regan and Finley sat next to Liv with Ben and Quinn facing them. The majority of Myles's position was to read legal mumbo jumbo and make sure everything was taken care of properly. Olivia assumed he would read off everything, cut the portions like cake and they would wash them down with a glass of milk; happy plates all around. Then Myles said, "Livvy Jean, you've been named the executor," and life got a little bit harder.

"What do you mean she's the executor?" Quinn asked. She'd taken the choice as an insult and her mouth hung open, "She's only twenty-eight."

Finley stifled a chuckle and Regan said, "Mom, did you just hear yourself? Liv is fully capable."

Ben put his arm around Quinn, "I'm sure he was just thinking it would be easier on you this way. He always thought he'd outlive you anyways."

Quinn looked at her son in shock, "He is the one who drank at least four Diet Cokes every day! He should still be here!" Quinn let out a sob for just a breath before placing her hand over her mouth. She brushed the bangs out of her face and sternly said, "My apologies Myles, please go on."

Myles stayed calm, "I'm so sorry, Quinn. This isn't going to be easy, it never is. Rob was concerned that it would be too much of a burden and didn't want to overwhelm you in the grieving process." He talked with his hands but they always returned to the same folded in front position, "However, Rob requests that I be here to assist Liv since she's new to this jargon."

Olivia couldn't believe what she was hearing, "Why would he do this? I'm terrible with money. Delaney handles all my bills." Myles was already handing a letter addressed to Olivia Jean Grigsby, the writing of which belonged to her father. Liv took the letter. "I need a minute, please."

She stepped outside for a cigarette. Sucking the cancer stick in, she ran her eyes over his handwriting. Just looking at it, you would think his writing felt rigid but she knew he wrote with a loose wrist.

Livvy Jean,

I hope I got to say everything. If not, the reason you've got this job is because you have the highest degree of education. You've earned it kid. Myles can help you if you need advice. Make sure everyone is taken care of, spread the wealth. Especially your mom, she is top shelf guac.

Love you, Dad

P.S. Stay hungry. Never settle. Not for a man, a job, nothing. Burn it down and start again if you have to.

Olivia knew half the reason had to be that Rob liked to keep things plain and simple. One person in charge was all that was needed. She wiped her eyes and went back to the family.

The rest of the afternoon was spent with Myles filling Liv's head with information, amounts, and debts. Most of the land and fifty percent of the money, \$160,000, would go to Quinn. Liv was to split things up evenly between the kids. By the end of the day, she had figured, split and mapped out everything. When the money was split evenly,

each of the siblings received \$40,000. This meant Liv almost had enough to be out of educational debt. *Twenty grand shy*, Liv thought as her financial belly growled. She scowled at the blank checks she'd been given and finally wrote out the siblings' chunks, each for \$33,000, with the exception of her own which she wrote out for \$61,000. *I'm taking out a massive Karma loan*, she thought. When she was finished, she passed them out, put everything away and headed out for another smoke on the back porch. No one questioned her.

On her way out, Quinn asked to join her. Liv was astonished, her mother never smoked, at least not in front of her. She didn't drink in front of her either, but Liv knew about the secret wine stash she kept in the drawer with the long underwear. Olivia lit her mother's cigarette for her, "Quite a summer we've had, huh, Mom?"

Liv watched her mother draw the smoke in. Quinn stared at the plush horse apple trees lifting and stretching their branches before the wind yanked them down to drop the lumpy green apples into the creek bed below. Quinn used to have Regan and Liv fill a basket with them and throw them under the house to kill spiders. She always reminded them as they rushed out the door, "Don't get that goo on your hands or it'll burn."

She asked Liv dryly, "What do you plan to do with your life now that your father's death has almost fixed it?" Quinn never took her eyes off the apples as she spoke, letting the smoke billow out of her mouth slowly. Liv couldn't believe her mother's word choice, as if her father had died on purpose. "What the fuck is that supposed to mean?"

Quinn drew in another drag slowly, as if in slow motion, Liv had never seen her mother move so leisurely. She turned her head towards Liv, "I just wondered what you'd do now that you're out of debt. Where are you going to go?"

Liv watched the trees wave and wriggle off the breeze. She didn't want to go anywhere. Liv felt as though home was a concept that had been hollowed out and she needed it to be filled before she could move on. Instead of explaining this to Quinn, she shrugged, "I'll figure it out tomorrow after I sleep on it." This, she felt, was a fair answer, yet Quinn's eyes lit on fire.

"What do you mean?," growled Quinn, "Have you not learned anything from this?" She stomped to the edge of the rickety wood porch. "You don't know when your life is going to end. It was just made easier for you and you have no idea where to begin?"

Olivia felt tears building in her eyes. As she sniffed them back her throat started closing. She swallowed and released, "What is the rush Mom? Why can't people enjoy life and go where it carries them? Why does everything have to be Go. Accomplish. Achieve?!"

Those three words were what Quinn sent her children off with as they jumped out of the minivan and ran into school. Although Rob was the one in the military, Quinn seemed to absorb the strict and productive aspects. Rob, on the other hand, would start something and never finish it completely. There was half a pipe fencing he hadn't painted. He'd been saying he was going to rebuild and stain the wooden porch for ten years. As Liv stood there, she noticed the nails jutting loose, the boards bobbing and creaking as Quinn stepped on them. The family mortar was gone.

Quinn had begun picking up the acorns that were scattered across the deck and tossed them over the side, "Life doesn't hand itself to you, Olivia. You don't discover it. You make a foundation and you grow into it."

"I got accepted into the Peace Corps if that's satisfying enough for you," Liv sassed, "They want me in Bulgaria and no I don't want to go. I no longer want to do anything I'm 'supposed' to do. It's just shit people do so

they can look in the mirror in the morning and tell themselves they're good people. I am a good person, flawed but good. I don't have to go help out a third world country to prove it. I want to do what I interpret my part to be in this life and right now I have lost my roots. I need to regroup and plant myself in something."

Quinn faced her daughter, "After all this, you lack a sense of purpose? Did you forget about God, Livvy?"

Liv could taste the fury in her mouth, "God and I have our own understanding of one another." By understanding, she meant that she would yell at Him and He would reply in silence. Olivia believed in a higher power of sorts but she was too bitter about her father to pay attention to them.

Olivia's phone started ringing. It was Finley but when she answered she was greeted by a gruff but pleasant voice, "Livvy Jean?! Hey, It's Cal Stowers. I've got your little sister, Finley, here. Caught her smoking some marijuana. You should meet me up here at the school." Click. No pause. No chance to respond. Liv looked up at Quinn, "I'll be back," and ran for her car.

When Liv rolled into the high school parking lot she saw a tearful Finley standing next to Cal. She looked so small in comparison to Cal, who was once a giant linebacker but was now only giant. He spit a lump of snuff on the

pavement as she got out of the car, "Livvy Jean! It's mighty nice to see you. You don't even look like you've aged a day since graduation. You gonna make the ten year reunion?"

Liv hadn't stopped walking, "Walk with me, Cal. Tell me what you want." She pointed at Finley as she walked towards the empty practice field and out of earshot, "Stay put or I'll end you." Back in high school, Liv used to steal test answers and Cal, being your typical jock, was one of her regular customers. Liv had to pay Cal once before to keep herself from being ratted out to the principal when the Biology II final answer went viral and 200 out of the 206 biology students made 100%.

When she and Cal were far enough away Liv asked, "What's she got on her?" Cal smiled, "A few joints, pretty impressive for a little thing like that. Enough to keep her out of OU med for sure, which she won't shut up about by the way."

Liv let out an exasperated sigh, "She's young, man. We just lost Dad."

"And I'm sorry for your loss," Cal interrupted, "but that's also why I called you. I figured you'd come into some money and I could use some help." Liv was struck by the fact that someone could actually take advantage of a

mournful situation. People like this were only supposed to exist in movies, not in real life.

"What the fuck do you want, Cal?" Liv bit her words, "What is so important you want to take advantage of the position my family is in? Fin is only seventeen for cryin' out loud!" If Liv could have shot lasers of hate from her eyes she would've burned Cal and the entire football field out of passionate distaste.

"Hey! You're lucky *I'm* the one that found her and that I even want to make a deal with you. I mean, I can take her to jail--"

"No." Liv halted, "No, that's unnecessary. What do you want?"

"Twenty grand ought to do it." Cal stood there looking at her as if he'd asked her plainly for a piece of gum. She looked at the sky, it was time to talk to the high power, "You're fucking laughing at me aren't you?!" Liv faced Cal, who stared at her, baffled. She laughed as she looked out at the surrounding pastures and forest. She groaned, "Karma. I should've trusted that trick would come sooner than later. Fucking bitch." Liv turned to make her way to her car and her checkbook.

"Hey!" Cal hollered, "You want these joints? I get tested."

Liv made Finley ride home with her. As soon as Cal was gone, Liv lit up one of the joints and said, "Nobody hears anything. It didn't happen. Now, where'd you get this?" When Finley was silent Liv screamed at her, "No way. You're not protecting anybody, Fin! I will fucking lose it unless you tell me right now, where you got this pot."

Finley had tears streaking her face, her eyes puffy from the week of waterworks she'd shed, "I got it from the field."

Liv's stomach lurched and she felt the blood drain from her face. She thought the weed tasted familiar. She sputtered, "What field?"

Finley looked out the car window but Liv could see her face in the reflection. She confessed, "The field that I found roaming the woods one day. I thought I smelled a skunk. I tried to find it, but I found the field instead. I was picking some buds off when I heard someone coming and hid. Then Ben came out but he never saw me and I watched him. I'm the youngest, not retarded. They smell like weed all the time. I'm surprised Mom hasn't figured it out." Finley slumped in her seat, the seat belt landing right underneath her chin. "I want in." Finley said, "I want in and either you let me or I go to Mom."

"What choice do I have?" Liv didn't have much time to be amazed because her phone rang in a voicemail. Phone reception was scarce in the backwoods that surrounded Ardmore and phone calls seldom made it through, usually only allowing voicemails to be received. She would have ignored it, but there was something gut wrenching about the timing and Liv no longer wanted to take any chances. Liv lurched from the slouched position of her car seat when she heard Hadley's voice through the static. The last Liv had heard, Ricky hadn't died but was in a coma being monitored by the police after Hadley had given her false statement of self-defense.

As Liv listened, Finley reached for the joint. At first Liv was reluctant to do this but realized she was being hypocritical and handed it over. Hadley talked fast, "Liv, Rick's awake. He's going to be fine minus a scar across his temple. He's also not pressing charges as long as I don't press charges, but the son of a bitch totally called the cops and told them about your pot field. They're on their way to take it now. I gotta go. I love you Liv. I hope you got this." Click.

Liv was overcome with adrenaline and exhaustion and looked at Fin. She snagged the joint from her hand and threw it out the window. Before Fin could object, Liv was

spewing out an explanation, "Fin, you gotta understand that selling drugs isn't cool. It's stressful as fuck. Like right this very moment, I have to figure something out because the cops found out about the field and now I have to save Mom's ass before *she* goes to jail for us." She tried to breathe as she pulled up to home. Finley panicked, "What do we do?!"

Liv parked and looked at her, "Go inside and tell Ben and Regan to torch and flush everything. Play dumb when they get here and don't leave from Ben and Regan's sight." Finley nodded and Liv leapt out of the car.

Quinn was standing out front, watching the sun as it began to set to the ringing of the evening locusts. Her eyes turned to Liv and locked on her pale daughter as she ran to the barn for the farm truck.

"You're white as a sheet!" Quinn said as she broke into a run a few strides behind her daughter, "What's happened?"

Liv never stopped running. She yelled at Finley, "Go inside and lock the doors. You know nothing, you hear me?!" Quinn followed after Liv and hopped in the passenger side of the white feed truck. Quinn shot her a ferocious look, warning Liv of her growing anger, but Liv ignored her and stepped on the gas.

"Hey! I'm talking to you, Liv. Tell me wha--"

"Listen. I'll tell you everything, but, please, just listen." Quinn was quiet. She had never heard Liv speak so sternly and seriously to her. Their heads swayed with the bouncing truck as they lurched over the bumpy pastures and weaved through thicket clusters.

Liv took a big breath before unloading on her, "I'm a drug dealer, Mom. Not hard drugs, just pot." Liv never took her foot off the gas as she tore through the pastures, over the bridge Rob had built over the creek and to the furthest nook on their land. She felt as though her blood had turned feral and pumped through her veins, as though the excess of her life was out maneuvering her and she was racing like an animal to cover her tracks.

"Ben and Regan grow it for me out here and we've been working on this for years. A guy found out about it and blackmailed me. It happened not even five minutes after Ben told me about Dad. I put him in a coma, but he woke up. While the me putting him in a coma thing is straightened out, he told the cops about my field and they're supposed to be coming for it right now." Liv was fixated on following the winding cow trail, beaten into the ground by their hooves. It led to the dead oak tree that marked the turning off point, not far from the pot field.

Quinn stared at Liv, her face stuck in horrific paralyzation as she processed the unraveling truth about her daughter. Her hands gripped the ripped and worn, wool seat covers as she cried out, "My God, Livvy. What have you done?! My God!"

Liv couldn't look at her mother as she finished her explanation, "We have to take care of it before they get here or our lives are ruined and we'll be forced to wear orange for the remainder of our mortal existence." By the time Liv realized she'd parked and had a chance to take a breath, Quinn was out of the truck, staring at the marijuana field.

In the depths of the country, you can hear dogs bark at passing cars miles away and if you listen and drive down those roads often enough, you become familiar with the sounds. You know which dogs are which and where. You can decipher between traffic down the street and the revving and roaring hums of the Redneck Speedway ten miles out. The sun had lowered to the tops of the trees on the rolling horizon when the two heard sirens miles away.

Quinn snapped out of spectator mode and looked at Liv, "It's gonna burn anyways, let's make it count." She ran to the back of the truck and tore down the gas can, a broom, a rake, and one of Rob's old flannels stuffed behind

the seat. Liv watched her, her father's words resounding in her head, *Burn it down and start again if you have to.*

Liv was amazed at her mother's quick thinking as Quinn wound the flannel into the rake before throwing the rake and barn broom on the ground. She doused the straw and flannel ends with gas. Quinn picked up the two-yard tools and handed the barn broom and a box of matches to Liv. "Light it on fire, Livvy!" Quinn shouted.

With the blaze of the match, Olivia and Quinn took off with their torches and ran as hard as their legs would let them. They followed one another along opposite sides and soon the entire field was engulfed in flames. The two were wrapped by a smoke that smelt of road kill skunk and baby poop. The lights on the top of cop cars were now visible from the hilltops their road wound through. They were two miles away.

"They still have to fuckin' find us," Quinn giggled, "I just said fuck! I must be stoned." She rubbed her hair and asked, "Why does my brain feel fuzzy? I feel like my brain grew hair and it's tickling the inside of my skull."

Liv swung an arm around Quinn and gave her a squeeze, "Mom, welcome to your first high time. Now, let's stomp out this fire." Liv took her shirt off and started beating the fire down with it. Quinn stared at her daughter, fearless

of the flames and tore her hoodie off to help. Just as the last flame was beat, the two heard the drug dogs howling.

Quinn stabbed her rake into the blackened field and said, "Rob would be so proud of us. He was a major pothead when I met him you know." Liv raised her eyebrows in amazement. Her mother nodded, "Oh yeah, he would've shit his pants if he saw what you were growing out here. Shit them with sheer joy that is."

The two hugged in the last of the daylight and Liv noticed her feet were sinking, "Mom, there's something squishy happening to the ground." The barking grew nearer as Liv ran to the truck to flip on the headlights. When she looked up she saw a black liquid gushing from Quinn's rake in the ground. "What is that?!" Liv shouted.

Quinn bent down and stuck her hand in it. It splattered all over her bra and jean shorts and she started laughing hysterically. Olivia grew concerned, "Momma, you all right over there?" Quinn finally turned revealing the grin on her face as she cried, "We've struck oil, Livvy! We're filthy rich!"

Liv ran to her mother. The two embraced and were a shirtless, oily mess. "What do we do now?!" Liv asked. Quinn looked around and said, "I don't know but I'd like to

see them try and find pot in this mess. Livvy, I think this is your Dad. I think he's protecting us right now."

Liv rested her head on her mother's shoulder for the first time in fifteen years. They could hear the voices of the cops drawing nearer and two German shepherds were already with them, barking and sniffing ferociously. The mother and daughter walked arm in arm towards the flashlights that were beginning to shine through the trees. The cops had found them.

A group of men on horses ambled out of the thicket and into the clearing. They shouted, "Police!" Put your hands up!" "Get on your knees!" Quinn and Olivia listened obediently but couldn't stop laughing as they dropped to their knees and assumed the position while they were handcuffed. A cop buzzed in on his walkie, "This is Deputy David, we've got oil gushing at the Grigsby's, call the refinery and get some guys out here." The cops were dumbfounded at the amount of black gold that flooded the ground.

"See that!" Quinn shouted, "All I did was stab the ground with a flippin' rake!"

Liv gasped, "Hey Mom, you think that rake belonged to Moses?" The two women cracked up despite the cops' demands for them to be quiet.

Another cop rode his horse right up to Liv and the others shouted at him to be careful before he trampled her. It was Rob's brother, Liv's Uncle Scott, who also happened to be Carter County's Sheriff. He spit over Olivia's head, "Boy if your Daddy could see you now. Hope you're proud of yourself Livvy Jean." He turned to Quinn, "You too Q. No wonder Rob didn't make you executor." He laughed alone and Liv popped off, "Hey, at least we made it in the will. Guess it sucks to suck, huh, brother Scott?"

Scott hopped down from his horse and yanked Liv up by the hair. "It's Uncle Scott to you, you good for nothin' skank. My brother's lucky he'll never have to see this."

Liv stared down the similar image of her father. His face was pale and angry, "What is it that he'll never see? His family striking oil? Cause you've wasted your time if you thought there was somethin' else going on out here." A cop came up behind the two women and uncuffed them, "She's right," he said, "nothin' here but black gold."

Scott's face grew red with disdain. Liv couldn't help but take another jab at him, "You know what your problem is? You don't smoke weed." She smiled, "I'd smoke you out if I had some but it's illegal I think."

He started to lunge at her but Quinn shoved him back. "Get the fuck away from my kid, Scott." Scott glared at

Quinn like he could smack her, "Your kid ain't done nothin' but stick her nose in books and smoke weed all day." He looked over her shoulder at Liv, "Hope you're happy you won't have a Daddy to walk you down the aisle, Liv."

Liv squeezed her mom and stared coldly at her uncle, "Good thing I've got one hell of a mother then." Scott made the cops search everywhere for the pot field but between the fire and oil they were never able to trace the green excess.